A DELL MAGAZINE
DELL
A DELL MAGAZINE
NOV - DEC
25¢

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN Magazine

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE
SUNSET PASS
A ZANE GREY NOVEL

ALSO SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE
NOV - DEC
A DELL MAGAZINE
DELL

Rock beat Preston back and knocked him against the wall.

Sunset Pass, Chap. 11

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 1, No. 1—November-December, 1946

NOVEL (complete in this issue)

SUNSET PASS — *Zane Grey* 3

SHORT STORIES

PASTURE IN THE ABANDONED PLACERS — *Raymond S. Spears* 142
TENNESSEE'S PARTNER—*A Western Classic* — *Bret Harte* 153
BEGINNERS' LUCK — *Eugene Cunningham* 162

PICTURE STORY

WILD BILL HICKOK AND THE TEXAS BADMAN — *Carl Smith & H. E. Vallely* 172

FACT FEATURE

WINDWAGON—*A true tale of the Old West* — *Stanley Vestal* 183

VERSE

THE LONE STAR TRAIL—*A cowboy song* 189
GIT ALONG, LITTLE DOGIES — Inside back cover

DEPARTMENTS

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR HORSES?—*A Western Quiz* 188
FREE-FOR-ALL—*The Editor Speaks* 191

Cover picture by Earl Sherwan—Frontispiece by Robert Weisman—Back cover: "Night Guard," a painting by Dan Muller.

Published bimonthly by
DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
149 Madison Avenue, New York, 16, N. Y.

by arrangement with THE HAWLEY PUBLICATIONS, INC. Second class entry applied for at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry applied for at the post office at Poughkeepsie, N. Y. Printed in the U. S. A. *Copyright 1946 by The Hawley Publications, Inc.* *Address all editorial correspondence and subscriptions to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Poughkeepsie, N. Y. Single copy, 25c; yearly subscription (6 issues) $1.50 in U. S. A. and possessions, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $1.75 in Canada; $2.00 in foreign countries. Advisory editors: R. Zane Grey, Stephen Slesinger, and K. Hawley.*

SUNSET PASS

In "Sunset Pass" Zane Grey has told a thrilling story of range conflict and of passion, both violent and tender. Reviewers have praised it for its "breath-taking incidents and gentler moments," for its author's "fruitful inventiveness in the contriving of gun fights and fist fights," and described it as "rich in color."

When a man has left town in a hurry right after a gun duel in which the party of the second part was killed, people don't generally expect he'll ever return. Well, True Rock left Wagontongue in just such a hurry—but he does return, after six years. He isn't quite sure just why he's coming back; it could be unwise, for he has a reputation as a gunman, and the sheriff may still be looking for him on account of that last shooting. Still, something prompts him to return; maybe it is the lingering memory of Amy Wund—maybe it is to see good old Sol Winter again, and pay back that money he borrowed from him. But deep down, True Rock knows he is coming back to stay.

His main problem is already solved—the old sheriff is dead. However, there is Thiry Preston, a new girl in Wagontongue who makes him forget all his infatuations of former days. And there are several new outfits on the range—especially interesting being the 13 Prestons (including Thiry) of Sunset Pass, headed by bluff, likeable Gage Preston, and dominated by that gun-slinging devil, Ash Preston.

Rock soon discovers that the other ranchers are suspicious of the way Preston is prospering, and it isn't much longer, after he hires out to Gage Preston, before he knows the suspicions are well-founded. So he prepares for the inevitable clash with Ash Preston as he courts Thiry, and tries to convince her that his own presence at Sunset Pass will not lead to the ruin of all the Prestons and end in death for either him or Ash, whom she loves with a stubborn, protective determination in spite of all his sins.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SUNSET PASS by Zane Grey. Copyright, 1931, by Zane Grey. By arrangement with the Hawley Publications, Inc.

BEGINNERS' LUCK by Eugene Cunningham. Copyright, 1927, by Doubleday, Page & Co. By permission of the author

WINDWAGON by Stanley Vestal. Copyright, 1939, by Walter Stanley Campbell. By permission of Houghton, Mifflin Co.

Sunset Pass

By ZANE GREY

Chapter One

True Rock Returns

The dusty overland train pulled into Wagontongue about noon of a sultry June day. The dead station appeared slow in coming to life. Mexicans lounging in the shade of the platform did not move.

Trueman Rock slowly stepped down from the coach, grip in hand, with an eager and curious expression upon his lean dark face. He wore a plain check suit, rather wrinkled, and a big gray sombrero that had seen service. His step, his lithe shape, proclaimed him to be a rider. A sharp eye might have detected the bulge of a gun worn under his coat, high over his left hip and far back.

He had the look of a man who expected to see someone he knew. There was an easy, careless, yet guarded air about him. He walked down the platform, passing stationmen and others now moving about, without meeting anyone who took more than a casual glance at him.

At the end of the flagstone walk Rock hesitated and halted, as if surprised, even startled. Across the wide street stood a block of frame and brick buildings, with high weatherbeaten signs. It was a lazy scene. A group of cowboys occupied the corner; saddled horses were hitched to a rail; buckboards and wagons showed farther down the street; Mexicans in colorful garb

sat in front of a saloon with painted windows.

Memory stirred to the sight of the familiar corner. He had been in several bad gun fights in this town. The scene of one of them lay before him and a subtle change began to affect his pleasure in returning to Wagontongue. He left the station, giving a wide berth to the street corner that had clouded his happy reflections.

But he had not walked half a block before he came to another saloon, the familiar look of which and the barely decipherable name —Happy Days—acted like a blow in his face. He quickened his step, then reacting to his characteristic spirit, he deliberately turned back to enter the saloon. The same place, the same bar, stained mirror, and faded paintings, the same pool tables. Except for a barkeeper, the room was deserted. Rock asked for a drink.

"Stranger hereabouts, eh?" inquired the bartender.

"Yes, but I used to know Wagontongue," replied Rock. "You been here long?"

"Goin' on two years."

"How's the cattle business?"

"Good, off an' on. Of course it's slack now, but there's some trade in beef."

"Beef? You mean on the hoof?"

"No. Butcherin'. Gage Preston's outfit do a big business."

"Well, that's new," replied Rock, thoughtfully. "Gage Preston? Heard his name somewhere."

"Are you a puncher or a cattleman, stranger?"

"Well, I was both," replied Rock, with a laugh. "Reckon that means I always will be."

Several booted men stamped in and lined up before the bar. Rock went out.

He went to the Range House, a hotel on another corner. It had been redecorated, he noticed. He registered, gave the clerk his baggage checks, and went to the room assigned him, where he further resisted the mood encroaching upon him by shaving and making himself look presentable to his exacting eyes.

"Sure would like to run into Amy Wund," he said, falling into reminiscence. "Or Polly Ackers. Or Kit Rand. All married long ago, I'll bet."

He went downstairs to the lobby, where he encountered a heavy-set, ruddy-faced man, no other than Clark, the proprietor, whom he well remembered.

"Howdy, Rock! Glad to see you," greeted that worthy, cordially if not heartily, extending a hand. "I seen your name on the book. Couldn't be sure till I'd had a peep at you."

"Howdy, Bill!" returned Rock, as they gripped hands.

"Wal, you haven't changed any, if I remember. Fact is you look fit, an' prosperous, I may say. How long since you left Wagontongue?"

"Six years."

"Wal, so long as that? Time shore flies. We've growed some, Rock. A good many cattlemen have come in. All the range pretty well stocked now. Then the sheep business is growin', in spite of opposition. We have two lumber mills, some big stores, a school, an' a town hall."

"Well, you sure are comin' on. I'm right glad, Bill. Always liked Wagontongue."

"Did you jest drop in to say hello to old friends, or do you aim to stay?" inquired Clark, his speculative eye lighting.

Rock mused over that query, while Clark studied him. After a moment he flipped aside Rock's coat. "Ahuh! Excuse *me,* Rock, for bein' familiar. I see you're packin' hardware, as usual. But I hope you ain't lookin' for someone."

"Reckon not, Bill. But there might be someone lookin' for me. How's my old friend, Cass Seward?"

"Ha! Wal, you needn't be curious aboot Cass lookin' for you. He's been daid these two years. He was a real sheriff, Rock, an' a good friend of yours."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that last, but Cass was a good fellow all right. Dead! I'm sure sorry. What ailed him, Bill?"

"Nothin'. He cashed with his boots on."

"Who killed him?"

"Wal, that was never cleared up for shore. It happened out here at Sandro. Cass got in a row an' was shot. The talk has always been that Ash Preston killed Seward. But nobody, least of all our new sheriff, ever tried to prove it."

"Who's Ash Preston?"

"He's the oldest son of Gage Preston, a new cattleman to these parts since you rode here. An' Ash is as bad a hombre as ever forked a hoss. I ain't sayin' any more, an' please regard that as confidence."

"Certainly, Bill," replied Rock, hastily. After some casual conversation about the range they parted in the hotel lobby.

Sitting there in a chair, he recalled friends and enemies of the old Wagontongue days. One of his best friends had been Sol Winter. Whenever Rock got into a scrape, provided it was not a shooting one, Sol was the one who helped him out of it. And as for money, Sol had always been his bank. Rock, remembering many things—one of which was that he had left Wagontongue hastily and penniless—thought he recalled a debt still unpaid. With that he sallied out to find Winter's store.

It should have been a couple of blocks down the street. Some of the

buildings were new, however, and Rock could not be sure. Finally he located the corner where Sol's place of business had been. A large and pretentious store now occupied this site. Rock experienced keen pleasure at the evidence of his old friend's prosperity, and he stalked gayly in, sure of a warm welcome. But he was only to learn that Sol Winter did not occupy this store.

Through inquiry, he located Sol Winter's store at the end of the street. It was by no means a small or cheap place, but it was not what it had once been. Rock entered. Sol was waiting upon a woman. He looked older, thinner, grayer, and there were deep lines in his face that seemed strange to Rock. Six years was a long time. Rock gazed round him. It was a large store room crowded with merchandise—hardware, groceries, saddles and harness and farm implements.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" inquired a voice at Rock's elbow. He turned to find Winter beside him.

"Howdy, Sol, old-timer!" said Rock, with a warm leap of his pulse. "Don't you know me?"

Winter leaned and crouched a little, his eyes piercing. Suddenly the tightness of his face loosened into a convulsive smile.

"True Rock!" he shouted incredulously. "If it ain't really you! Why, you ole ridin', drinkin', shootin', love-makin' son of a gun!"

"Glad to see me, Sol?" returned Rock, tingling under Winter's grip.

"Glad? Lordy, there ain't words to tell you. Why, True, you were always like my own boy. An' since I lost him—"

"Lost him! Who? You never had any boy but Nick. What you mean?"

"Didn't you ever hear aboot Nick? Nick was shot off his hoss out near Sunset Pass."

"Aw—no! Sol! That fine sweet lad! My God! I'm sorry," exclaimed Rock, huskily, as he wrung Winter's hand. "But it was an accident?"

"So they say, but I never believed it. There's still bad blood on the range, True. You must remember. In fact there's some new bad blood come in since you left."

Here a customer entered, and Rock was left to himself for the moment. He seated himself on the counter and put aside his sombrero, to find his brow clammy and cold. Nick Winter dead! Shot by rustlers, probably, or some enemy of Winter's, or perhaps by this new bad element hinted at by Clark and Winter. The last thing Rock would have expected was that anyone could do violence to gentle, kindly, crippled Nick Winter. Here was something to keep Rock around Wagontongue, if nothing else

offered.

"True, it's good to see you sittin' there," said Winter, returning to place a hand on Rock's shoulder. "I never saw you look so well, so clean an' fine. I don't need to be told you've worked hard."

"Yes, Sol. I've been five years on a cattle job in Texas. Cleaned up ten thousand, all honest and square. I've got a roll that would choke a cow."

"No! Ten thousand? Why, True, that's a small fortune! It'll make you. If only you don't get drunk an' begin to gamble."

"Well, Sol, maybe I won't. But I've gone straight so long I'm worried. How much do I owe you?"

"Owe me? Nothin'," replied Sol, smiling.

"Look over your books before I hand you one," ordered Rock, fiercely. Whereupon he helped Winter find the old account, which was not small, and forced him to accept payment with interest.

"Say, Rock, to be honest, this little windfall will help a lot," declared Winter. "I got in a cattle deal some time past an' lost out pretty much in debt. Then the new store—Dabb's—ate into my trade. I had to move. Lately, though, my business has picked up. Old customers have come back. I think I can pull out."

"That's good. Who'd you go in cattle deals with?" rejoined Rock, gruffly.

"Dabb."

"Dabb? Not John Dabb who ran things here years ago?"

"Yes, John Dabb."

"Well, Sol, you ought to have known better."

"Sure. But it seemed such a promisin' deal, an' it was for Nick's sake—but I'm out of cattle deals for good."

"Go on. Tell me some more bad news," said Rock, gloomily. "What's become of my old girl, Kit Rand?"

"Kit. Let me see. I know she married Chess Watkins—"

"What! That drunken loafer?" interrupted Rock indignantly.

"Yes, an' she couldn't change him, either. Kitty had to go to work in a restaurant here, an' finally they left Wagontongue. Never heard of them since."

"Kitty Rand? That dainty, clever little girl a waitress! Good Lord! How about Polly Ackers?"

"Polly went to the bad," returned Sol, gravely. "Some flash gambler got around her. She's been gone for years."

Rock groaned. "I'm sorry I ever came back to this darned Wagontongue. I'll ask one more question. How about my best girl, Amy Wund?"

"Worse an' more of it, True," rejoined Winter. "After you left,

Amy played fast an' loose with many a puncher. There are some who say yet she never got over your runnin' away."

"Thunder! They're crazy!" burst out Rock. "She played fast an' loose with *me*. She never cared two snaps for me."

"Yes, she did, if there's anythin' in gossip. Mebbe she never found it out till you were gone. Amy was a highstrung lass. An' you know, Rock, you were sweet on Polly at the same time."

"Lord forgive me, I was."

"Boys will be boys. I reckon you didn't know your mind any better'n Amy knew hers. She broke the hearts of all the cowboys on the range—an' then up an' married John Dabb. He was a widower with a daughter 'most as old as Amy. They were married a year or so ago. It was a poor match, they say. Amy is not happy an' she flirts as much as ever."

Trueman Rock dropped his head.

"Son, it's the way of life," went on Winter. "You've been gone a long time. An' things happen to people, most of it sad, I'm sorry to say."

"Sol, will you keep my money till I come askin' for it?" queried Rock, with his hand inside his waistcoat.

"Now what're you up to?"

"I'm goin' out and get awful, terrible drunk," declared Rock.

Winter laughed, though he looked serious enough. "Don't do it, True."

"I am, by gosh!"

"Please don't, son. It'll only fetch back the old habit. You look so fine, I'd hate to see you do it."

"I'm goin' to drown my grief, Sol," declared Rock, solemnly.

"Well, wait till I come back," returned Winter. "I've got to go to the station. My clerk is off today. Keep store for me. There's not much chance of any customer comin' in at this noon hour, but if one does come, you wait on him—like you used to."

"All right. I'll keep store. But you rustle back here pronto."

Winter hurried out, bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves, leaving Rock sitting on the counter, a prey to symptoms he well knew. If Sol did not hurry back—

A light quick step arrested the current of Trueman's thoughts. He looked up. A girl had entered the store. His first swift sight of her caused him to slip off the counter. She looked around expectantly, and seeing Rock she hesitated, then came forward. Rock suddenly realized that to get terribly drunk was the very remotest thing that he wanted or intended to do.

"Is Mr. Winter in?" asked the girl, pausing before the counter.

"No. He had to go to the station. Reckon he'll be there quite some

time."

"Oh—I'm sorry. I—I can't wait, and I wanted him particularly."

"Can I do anythin' for you?" inquired Rock. He was cool, easy, respectful.

"Are you the new clerk Mr. Winter was expecting?" she queried.

"Yes, miss, at your service."

"I've quite a list of things to get," she said, opening a handbag to pry into it.

"I'll do my best, miss. But I'm a little new to the business."

"That's all right. I'll help you," she returned, graciously. "Now where is that paper?"

The delay gave Trueman opportunity to look at her covertly. She was thoroughbred Western, about 21 or 22, blond, with fair hair more silver than gold. She was not robust of build, yet scarcely slender. She wore a faded little blue bonnet not of the latest style, and her plain white dress, though clean and neat, had seen long service.

"Here it is," she said, producing a slip of paper and looking up somewhat flushed. Her eyes were large, wide apart, gray in color. Rock looked into them. Something happened to him then that had never happened before and which could never happen again. "Now, shall I read the list off one at a time or altogether?"

"Well, miss, it really doesn't—make any difference," replied Trueman, vaguely, gazing at her lips. They were sweet and full and red, and just now curved into a little questioning smile. But, as he watched, it fled and then they seemed sad. Indeed her whole face seemed sad, particularly the deep gray eyes that had begun to regard him somewhat doubtfully.

"Very well—the groceries first," she said, consulting her list. "Five of sugar, five of rice, five—"

"Five what?" interrupted Trueman, with alacrity, moving toward the grocery department. Everything was in plain sight. It ought to be easy, if he could keep his eyes off her.

"Five what!" she echoed, in surprise, raising her head. "Did you think I meant barrels? Five *pounds.*"

"Sure. That's what I thought," replied Trueman, hastily. "But some people buy this stuff in bulk. I used to."

"Oh, you were not always a clerk, then?" she inquired, following him.

"Oh, no! I've been a—a lot of things."

She looked as if she believed him. Rock began to grasp that he was bungling the greatest opportunity of his life. He found the sugar and had almost filled a large sack when she checked him: "Not brown sugar. White, please."

There was something in her tone

that made Rock wonder if she were laughing at him. It stirred him to dexterity rather than clumsiness. He filled a large paper bag with white sugar.

"But you didn't weigh it," she said.

"I never weigh out small amounts," he returned blandly. "I can guess very accurately."

"There's more than five pounds of sugar in that bag," she protested.

"Probably, a little. Sure I never guess underweight." He laid the bag on the counter. "What next? Oh, the rice."

"Can you guess the weight of rice, too?"

"Sure can. Even better. It's not near so heavy as sugar." And he filled a larger bag. In attempting to pass this to her he accidentally touched her bare hand with his. The soft contact shot a thrilling current through him. He dropped the bag. It burst, and the rice poured all over her, and like a white stream to the floor.

"There—you've done it," she said, aghast.

"Excuse me, miss. I'm sure awkward this day. But rice is lucky. That might be a good omen. I'm superstitious. Spillin' rice might mean a wedding,"

She blushed, but spoke up with spirit. "It couldn't, so far as I'm concerned," she said. "Of course I don't know your affairs. But you are wasting my time. I must hurry. They'll be waiting."

Rock humbly apologized and proceeded to fill another bag with rice. Then he went on with the order, and for several moments, in which he kept his eyes averted, he performed very well as a clerk. He certainly prayed that Sol would not come back soon.

Who was she? He had never in his life met such a girl. She could not be married. Too young and—he did not know what! He stole a glance at her left hand. Ringless! What a strong, shapely hand, neither too large nor too small, nor red and rough like that of most ranchers' daughters. It was, however, a hand that had seen work. Naturally Rock wondered if she rode a horse. The goddess of every cowboy's dreams was a horsewoman. Did he dare to ask her if she loved a horse? Rock divined that his usual audacity and adroitness with the feminine sex were wanting here.

"That's all the groceries," she said. "Now I want buttons, thread, calico, dress goods, linen and—"

At the dry-goods counter Rock was in a quandary. He could not find anything.

The young lady calmly walked behind the counter. "Can't you read?" she inquired, pointing at some boxes.

"Read!" exclaimed Trueman, in

an injured tone. "Sure I can read. I went to school for eight years. That's about four more than any cowpuncher I ever met."

"Indeed! No one would suspect it," she returned, demurely. "If you're a cowboy—what're you doing in here?"

"I just lately went to clerking," he hastened to reply.

"Show me the buttons. There—in the white boxes. Thank you."

While she bent over them, looking and assorting, Trueman regained something near composure, and he feasted his eyes on the little stray locks of fair hair that peeped from under her bonnet, on the small well-shaped ear, on the nape of her neck, beautiful and white, and upon the contour of cheek.

"It isn't pearl?" she inquired, holding a button in her palm.

"Sure is," he replied, dreamily, meaning her cheek, suddenly, terribly aware of its nearness and sweetness.

"That pearl!" she exclaimed in amaze, looking up. "Don't you know bone when you see it?"

"Oh—the button! I wasn't lookin' at it. Sure that's bone. If you want pearl buttons, maybe I can help." And he bent over the box. It was not necessary to bend with his head so close to hers, but he did so, until he felt one of those stray silky locks of hair brush his cheek.

She felt it, too, for there seemed to come a sudden still check to everything in connection with the business at hand. Then she drew away. "Thank you. I can help myself. You find the thread."

It turned out that she had to find the thread, too, and then asked for a certain kind of dress goods, utterly foreign to him, and which she had to locate herself.

"How much of this?" asked Rock, stripping off yards of the soft material.

"Five. And I want it cut on the bias," she returned.

"On the bias," he echoed. "Oh, sure." And he went at the task desperately, realizing full well that he could not stand this deception much longer. But he had not progressed very far when she interrupted. "Stop! You'll ruin it. That's not the way I want it cut," she cried. She brushed him aside, and taking up the shears began carefully to cut the material.

"I'm sorry," spoke up Rock, contritely. "I'm not usually so dumb. But you see I never before waited on such a—a girl as you."

She shot him a gray glance not wholly doubtful or unforgiving. And meeting his eyes caused her to look down again with a tinge of color staining her cheeks.

"I'm not a clerk. Good heavens! If the gangs I've ridden with would drop in here to see me—doin' this. Whew! My name is Trueman Rock.

I'm an old friend of Sol Winter's."

"Trueman Rock?" she repeated, almost with a start, as she swiftly lifted big, questioning, surprised eyes. That name was not unfamiliar to her, but Rock could not tell whether she attached good or bad to it.

"Yes. I used to ride this range years ago. I've been gone six years—five of which I've spent in Texas, workin' hard and—well, I'd like you to know, because maybe you've heard talk here. Workin' hard and goin' straight. I sold out. Somethin' drew me back to Wagontongue. Got here today, and when I ran in to see Sol he left me here in charge of the store. Said no one would come in, but if someone did to wait on him. Well, as you see, *someone* did come in. I'm sorry I've annoyed you—kept you waitin'. But it was Sol's fault. Only, I should have told you first off."

"You needn't apologize, Mr. Rock," she replied shyly. "There's no harm done, except to the rice."

"I'm not so sure of that," he returned, coolly. Now that the deception was past, he had begun to feel more like himself.

"Please wrap these for me," she said, pushing the cut goods along the counter; she did not look up.

Elaborately Trueman wrapped those parcels.

"Charge to Thiry Preston," she said.

He found a pencil near at hand, and bending over a piece of wrapping paper, very business-like, he inquired, "*Miss* Thiry Preston?"

"Yes, *Miss*," she replied.

"What place?" he went on. Then as she stared, he continued, "Where do you live?"

"Sunset Pass."

"Way out there?" He glanced up in surprise. "Sixty miles. I know that country—every waterhole, stone, bunch of cactus, and jackrabbit."

She smiled fully for the first time, and that smile further fascinated Rock. "You were well acquainted, weren't you?"

"I expect to renew old acquaintances out there. And I may be lucky enough to make new ones."

Miss Preston did not meet his glance and there was other evidence of discouragement.

"What instructions about these parcels?"

"None. I'll carry them."

"Carry them! All this heavy load? Thirty pounds or more!"

"Surely. I'm quite strong. I've carried far more."

"Where to?"

"Out to the corral. Our buckboard is there. They'll be waiting and I'm late. I must hurry." In rather nervous haste she took up the several light packages and moved toward the other counter.

Rock got there first and inter-

cepted her. "I'll carry these."

"But you shouldn't leave the store," she protested.

Fortunately, at this juncture Sol Winter hurriedly entered. "Well, now, what's this?" he queried, with broad smile. "Thiry, to think you'd happen in just the wrong minute."

"Oh, Mr. Winter, I didn't miss you at all," returned Thiry, gayly. "Your new clerk was most obliging and—and capable—after I found the things I needed."

"Haw! Haw! He's shore a fine clerk. Thiry, meet True Rock, old rider an' pard of mine."

"Ah—I remember now," she flashed. "Is Mr. Rock the rider who once saved your son Nick?"

"Yes, Thiry," he replied, and turning to Rock he added, "Son, this lass is Miss Thiry Preston, who's helped to make some hard times easier for me."

"Happy to meet you, Miss Preston," beamed Rock, over his load of bundles.

"How do you do, Mr. Rock," returned Thiry, with just a hint of mischief in her gray eyes.

They went out together and Trueman felt that he was soaring to the blue sky. Outside in the sunshine he could see her better and it was as if some magic had transformed her. Really he had not seen her at all. He felt more deceitful than ever, for he kept turning to her to say ordinary things, about the heat, the dust, and what not, when he only wanted to look at her.

They soon reached the end of the street and started across an open flat toward the corrals.

"You're in an awful hurry," finally complained Trueman.

"Yes, I am. I'm late, and you don't know—" She did not complete the sentence, but nevertheless it told Rock much.

"This load is heavy. You'd never have packed it," declared Trueman, slowing up. Any excuse was better than none. He was going to lose this wonderful girl in another moment. He wanted to prolong it. Slyly he pinched a hole in the bag of rice and it began to spill out in a thin stream. "There! We've rushed so we've broken the sack," he went on. "And it's the rice, too! Miss Thiry, it's an omen."

"Mr. Rock, I fear you are many things besides a clerk," she said, shaking her head sadly. "Here, let me take the bag. I'll turn it upside down. If I had far to go with you I'd have no groceries left."

"But wouldn't it be great *if* we had farther to go?" he asked.

"I can't see that it would," she replied dubiously. "Especially if my dad was at the end of the walk."

"Your dad. Is he a terror?"

"Indeed he is—to boys who come gallivanting after me."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Trueman coolly.

By this time they had reached the first corral. The big gate swung ajar. The fence was planked and too high to see over. Loud voices and thud of hoofs came from somewhere, probably the second corral. Thiry led the way in. Rock espied some saddle-horses, a wagon, and then a double-seated buckboard hitched to a fine-looking team of roans.

"Here we are," said the girl, with evident relief. "No one come yet! I'm glad. Put the bundles under the back seat, Mr. Rock."

He did as directed, and then faced her, not knowing what to say, fearing the mingled feelings that swept over him and bewildered by them.

"After all, you've been very kind —even if—"

"Don't say if," he broke in, entreatingly. "Don't spoil it by a single if. It's been the greatest adventure of my life."

"Of many like adventures, no doubt," she replied, her clear gray eyes on him.

"I've met many girls in many ways, but there has never been anything like this," he returned.

"Mr. Rock!" she protested, lifting a hand to her cheek, where a wave of scarlet burned.

Then a clink of spurs, slow steps, and thuds of hoofs sounded behind Rock. They meant nothing particular to him until he saw the girl's color fade and her face turn white. A swift shadow darkened the great gray eyes.

"Hyah she ish, Range," called out a coarse voice, somehow vibrant, despite a thick hint of liquor. "With 'nother galoot, b'gosh! Schecond one terday."

Slowly Rock turned on his heel, and in the turning went back to the original self that had been in abeyance for a while. When it came to dealing with men he was not a clerk.

Two riders had entered the corral, and the foremost was in the act of dismounting. He was partly drunk, but that was not the striking thing about him. He looked and breathed the very spirit of the range at its wildest. He was tall, lean, lithe, with a handsome red face, eyes hot as blue flame, and yellow hair that curled scraggily from under a dusty black sombrero. He had just been cleanshaved. Drops of blood and sweat stood out like beads on his lean jowls and his curved lips. A gun swung below his hip.

The other rider, called Range, was a cowboy, young in years, with still gray eyes like Miss Preston's, and intent, expressionless face, dark from sun and wind. Rock gathered, from the resemblance, that this boy was Thiry's brother. But who was the other?

"Thiry, who's thish?" queried

the rider, dropping his bridle and striding forward.

"I can introduce myself," struck in Rock coolly. "I'm Trueman Rock, late of Texas."

"Hell you shay!" returned the other ponderingly, as if trying to fit the name to something in memory. "Whash you doin' hyar?"

"Well, if it's any of your business, I was in Winter's store and packed over Miss Preston's bundles," replied Rock, in slow, dry speech.

"Haw! Haw!" guffawed the rider derisively. Who was he? Surely not a lover! The thought seemed to cut fiercely into Rock's inner flesh. "Wal," went on the tall rider presently, swaggering closer to Rock, "run along, Big Hat, 'fore I reach you with a boot."

"*Ash!* You're drunk!" burst out the girl, as if suddenly freeing her voice.

The disgust and scorn and fear, and something else in her outbreak, instantly gave Rock tight rein on his own feelings. This rider, then, was Ash Preston, of whom Rock had heard significantly that day. Her brother! The relief Rock experienced outstressed anything else for the moment.

"Whosh drunk?" queried Preston, placatingly, of his sister. "Your mistake, Thiry."

"Yes, you are drunk," she returned with heat. "You've insulted Mr. Rock, who was kind enough to help me carry things from the store."

"Wal, I'll help Mishter Rock on his way," replied Preston, leering.

Range, the other rider, like a flash leaped out of his saddle and jerked Preston's gun from its sheath. "Ash, you look out," he called sharply. "You don't know this fellar."

Chapter Two

Rock Makes a Decision

"WHASH the hell I care? He's Big Hat, an' I'm a-goin' to chase him pronto."

Thiry Preston stepped out as if impelled, yet she was evidently clamped with fear. "Please, Ash, be decent if you can't be a gentleman," begged Thiry.

For answer Preston lurched by Thiry and swept out a long slow arm, with open hand, aimed at Rock's face. But Rock dodged, and at the same time stuck out his foot dexterously. The rider, his momentum unchecked, tripped and lost his balance. He fell slowly, helplessly, and striking on his shoulder he rolled over in the dirt. He sat up, ludicrously, and wiping the dust off his cheek he extended a long arm, with shaking hand, up at Rock. "Shay, you hit me, fellar."

"Preston, you're quite wrong. I didn't," replied Rock.

"Whash you hit me with?" he went on, sure that indignity had been committed upon him.

"I didn't hit you with anythin'."

"Range, is thish hyar Big Hat lyin' to me?"

"Nope. You jest fell over him," returned the younger rider, laconically.

"Ash, you're so drunk you can't stand up," interposed Thiry.

"Wal, stranger, I'm 'ceptin' your apology."

"Thanks. You're sure considerate," returned Rock with sarcasm. He was not used to total restraint and he could not remember when any man had jarred him so. Turning to the girl, he said: "I'll go. Good-by, Miss Preston."

With his back to the brothers Trueman made his eyes speak a great deal more than his words. The dullest of girls would have grasped that he did not mean good-by forever. Thiry's response to his gaze was a silent one of regret, of confusion, of something more of which she was unconscious.

Rock stepped up on the corral fence, reached the top rail, and vaulted over. Outside he saw men and horses coming, and was glad that they were not in line with him. Thoughts and emotions almost overwhelmed Rock. "Ash Preston! Bad medicine! And he's her brother!" muttered Rock, aloud. "Sure as fate we're goin' to clash."

He halted on a street corner long enough to see the buckboard, the wagon, and several mounted riders move away briskly toward the south. Rock's sharp eye picked out Thiry's white dress and blue bonnet. Amazing and stirring was it to Rock that she turned to look back. She could see him standing there. Quickly the little cavalcade passed out of sight behind trees.

He strode back to Sol Winter's store.

"Now, son, what's happened?" queried Sol, with concern.

"Lord knows. I—don't," panted Rock, spilling off his sombrero and wiping his face. "But it's—a lot."

"True, you took a shine to Thiry Preston. I seen that. No wonder. She's the sweetest lass who ever struck these parts."

"Sol, we'll investigate my state of mind last," replied Rock, ruefully. "Listen. I ran into the Preston outfit. At least, two of them. Thiry's brothers, Range and Ash." And he related to his friend all that had occurred at the corral.

"Aw! Too bad for Thiry. She's always bein' humiliated. No wonder she comes to town so seldom. Why, Rock, she's liked by everybody in this town."

"Liked! Sol, you old geezer, this here town ought to do better than that. But I sure agree with you. Too bad for Miss Thiry. Oh, she felt hurt. I saw tears run down her

cheeks."

"An' you took water from that Ash Preston?" mused Winter.

"I sure did. Gee! it felt queer. But I'd taken a beatin' for that girl."

"Rock, you have changed. You're bigger, stronger. You've grown—"

"Hold on, Sol. Don't make me out so much that you'll have to crawl later. But if I have improved a little I'm thankin' the Lord. Sol, I meant to get terrible drunk till that girl stepped in this store."

"An' *now* you don't?" queried Winter gladly.

"Hell! I wouldn't take a drink for a million dollars," replied Rock, with a ring in his voice. "You should have seen Thiry's face—have heard her when she said, 'Ash—you're *drunk.*' "

"Yes, I know. Thiry hates drink. She has cause. Most of the Prestons are a drinkin' lot. But, son, are you serious? Has bein' with Thiry Preston for a little while changed your idea about red liquor?"

"Sol, it sure has. I don't know just what's happened to me, but *that* you can gamble on."

"Son, it sounds good. If it isn't just excitement. Why, most every young fellar—an' some older ones—in this country have been struck by lightnin' when they first seen Thiry. But I can't see that it did them good. For they drank only the harder. Thiry isn't to be courted, they say."

"Struck by lightnin'. Sure that might be it. But never you mind about me. I want to know all about this Preston outfit. You can trust me. I'm back here for good. I'll absolutely not give you any more trouble. I'm goin' to help you. So come out with everythin'."

"Same old Rock," mused Winter. "No, not the same, either. There's a difference I can't name yet. Wal, this Preston outfit is sure prominent in these parts. They call them 'The Thirteen Prestons of Sunset Pass.' It's a big family. Nobody seems to know where they come from. Anyway, they drove a herd of cattle in here some time after you left. An' 'ceptin' Ash Preston, they're just about the most likable outfit you ever seen. Fact is, they're like Thiry. So you don't need to be told more about that. They located in Sunset Pass, right on the Divide. You know the place. An' it wasn't long until they were known all over the range. Wonderful outfit with horses and ropes."

"Go on, Sol. It's sure like a story to me. What was the trouble you had?"

"They ran up a big bill in my store. The old store, you remember. I taxed the boys about it. Well, it was Ash Preston who raised the hell. He wasn't drunk then. An', son, you need to be told that Ash is wild when he's drunk. When sober

he's—well, he's different. Nick was alone in the store. Nick was a spunky lad, you know, an' he razzed Ash somethin' fierce. Result was Ash piled the lad in a corner an' always hated him afterward. Fact is the range talk says Ash Preston hates everybody except Thiry. She's the only one who can do anythin' with him."

"She didn't do a whole lot today. The drunken—! And Nick was shot off his horse out there in Sunset Pass?"

"Yes. An' I've never breathed to anyone my natural suspicion. I think Ash Preston must have killed Nick. They must have met an' fought it out. There were four empty shells, fresh shot, in Nick's gun."

"The boy had nerve and he was no slouch with a six-shooter. I wonder—"

"Well, Gage paid the bill first time he came to town. Then for a while he didn't buy from me. But one day Thiry came in, an' ever since I've sold goods to the Prestons. But none of them save Thiry have ever been in my store since. She does the orderin' an' she pays pronto."

"Ahuh. Any range talk among the punchers about these Prestons?"

"Well, son, there used to be no more than concerned the Culvers, or Tolls, or Smiths, an' not so much as used to be about the little outfits down in the woods. You know the range. All the outfits eat one another's cattle. It was a kind of unwritten code. But, lately, the last two years, conditions have gone on the same, in that way, an' some different in another. I hear a good deal of complaint about the rustlin' of cattle. An' a few dark hints about the Prestons have seeped in to me off the range.

"Darn few, mind you, son, an' sure vague an' untrailable. It might be owin' to the slow gettin' rich of Gage Preston. It's a fact. He's growin' rich. Not so you could see it much in cattle, but in land an' money in bank. I happen to know he has a bank account in Las Vegas. That's pretty far off, you know, an' it looks queer to me. Found it out by accident. I buy from a wholesale grocer in Las Vegas. He happened here, an' in a talk dropped that bit of information. It's sure not known here in Wagontongue, an' I'm askin' you to keep it under your hat."

"Is Gage Preston one of these lone cattlemen?" queried Rock thoughtfully.

"Not now, but he sure was once."

"Who's he in with now?"

"John Dabb. They own the Bar X outfit. It's not so much. Dabb has the big end of it. Then Dabb runs a butcher shop. Fact is he undersold me an' put me out of that

kind of business. He buys mostly from Preston. An' he ships a good many beeves."

"Ships? Out of town?" asked Rock in surprise.

"I should smile. They have worked into a considerable business, with prospects. I saw this opportunity years ago, but didn't have the capital."

Rock pondered over his friend's disclosures, and Thiry Preston's sad face returned to haunt him.

"Sol, what do you think about Ash Preston?" asked Rock.

"Well, son, I'm sure curious to ask you that same question," replied Winter. "How did this fellow strike you?"

"Like a hard fist, right in the eye," acknowledged Rock.

"Ahuh. I'm glad your sojourn in Texas hasn't dulled your edge," said Winter with satisfaction. "Rock, the Prestons are all out of the ordinary. Take Thiry, for instance. How did *she* strike you?"

Trueman placed a slow heavy hand on the region of his heart. and gazed at his friend as if words were useless.

"Well, I wouldn't give two bits for you if she hadn't. Son, I've a hunch your comin' back means a lot. Wal, to go on—these Prestons are a mighty strikin' outfit. An' Ash Preston stands out even among them. He's a great rider of the range in all pertainin' to that hard game. He can drink more, fight harder, shoot quicker than any man in these parts. He's sure the meanest, coldest, nerviest, deadliest proposition you're likely to stack up against in your life. I just want to give you a hunch, seein' you went sweet on Thiry."

"Thanks, old friend. Forewarned is forearmed, you know. The man was drunk when I met him, but I think I grasped a little of what you say."

Winter evidently found more in this reply to worry him. "Well, then, you know what the risk is."

"Sol, what do I care for risks?" burst out Rock contemptuously.

"True, you always were a sudden cuss, but even so, you could hardly get serious—real serious over Thiry Preston so quick. Sweet on her, I mean."

"Sweet on *that* girl! No! I've been sweet on a hundred girls. This is different. I don't know what. But it's somethin' terrible. Ten thousand times sweet!"

"Son, you needn't bite my head off," protested Winter. "If you want to know, I'm tickled stiff—an' scared to death. I love that girl. An' if you haven't forgot, I was once some fond of you."

"Sol, I haven't forgotten," replied Rock with warmth. "But don't you dare ever mention my—my old girl friends. And if you'd dare to tell Thiry I'd murder you."

"Somebody will tell her, son. For instance, Mrs. John Dabb. She likes Thiry. She'll tell her. I see them together occasionally."

"Mrs. John Dabb. She couldn't know much."

"I told you she was Amy Wund."

"Oww!" wailed Rock, bending double.

"Trueman, your trail will sure be rough."

"Listen, old friend. There's only one thing that could stump me. Tell me. Do you know Thiry real well?"

"Yes, son, an' I can answer that question so plain in your eyes. Thiry is not in love with anybody. I know, because she told me herself, not so long ago. She loves her family, especially Ash. But there's no one else."

"That'll—help," replied Rock, swallowing hard. "Now, Sol, I'll sneak off alone somewhere and try to find out what's the matter with me—and what to do about it."

Trueman sallied forth into the sunlight like a man possessed. He did not notice the heat while he was striding out of town, but when he got to the cedars and mounted a slope to a lonely spot he was grateful for the cool shade. He threw aside coat and sombrero, and lay down on the fragrant mat of cedar needles. How good to be there!

Rock always went to the loneliness and silence of desert or forest when in any kind of trouble. He had not been in this shady spot for five minutes before the insidious spell of nature prevailed. He could think here.

Only one thing had stood in the way of a happy return to Wagontongue, and that had been possibility of a clash with Cass Seward, the sheriff. This now no longer perturbed him. It had been reckless, perhaps foolish, for him to come back, when he had known that the probabilities were that Cass would try to make him show yellow and clap him in jail, because of a shooting affray which Rock had not started. But it had been Rock's way to come, not knowing; and that hazard was past. Rock paid tribute to the dead sheriff, and gladly welcomed the fact that he had a clean slate before him.

That gray-eyed girl, Thiry Preston! Here he did surrender. He had been struck through the heart. And all the fight there was seemed directed against himself—a wavering, lessening doubt that he could be as marvelously transformed as he thought. And then, one by one, in solemn procession, there passed before his memory's eye the other girls he had known, trifled with, liked, or loved. A few stood out brightly. He watched them pass by, out of the shade, it seemed, into the past forever.

Thiry Preston had made them vanish, as if by magic. Trueman did not sentimentalize or argue about it. She was the girl. All his life he had been dreaming of her. To realize she actually lived! Nor did he ask himself any questions about love. Whatever it was, it had been sudden, inevitable, and fearsome only in its premonition of tremendous might.

This was not decision, but a realization and acceptance. Decision had to do with remaining at or near Wagontongue, and it was made the instant the question presented. He would ask Gage Preston for a job riding, and if one was not available he would ask some other cattleman. Not likely was it that any rancher thereabouts would not find a place for Trueman Rock. In such event, however, he could go into the cattle business himself.

The thought of Ash Preston was disturbing. Rock had a premonition that he would have trouble with Preston, but he refused to harbor it. He absolutely must not fight with Thiry's brother.

At length Rock left the cedar nook and started to retrace his steps toward town and Winter's store. His friend was busy with customers, so Rock betook himself toward the hotel. A young woman, coming out of Dabb's large establishment, almost ran into Rock.

"Excuse me," he said, touching his hat.

"True Rock—aren't you going to speak to me?" she burst out.

He knew the voice, the face, too, the dark, sparkling, astonished eyes.

"True—don't you know *me?*" she asked, with mingled reproach and gayety. "It's Amy."

"Why, Mrs. Dabb, this is a surprise!" he said, doffing his sombrero, and bowing over her hand. "I'm sure glad to see you."

"Mrs. Dabb? Not Amy?" she rejoined, with captivating smile and look Rock found strangely familiar.

"Someone told me you were married to my old boss, John Dabb," said Rock easily. "You sure look well and fine. And prosperous, too."

She did not like his penetrating gaze and his slow, cool speech. "True, I can return the compliment. You are handsomer than ever."

"Thanks."

"True, you're not glad to see me," she rejoined petulantly.

"Why, sure I am! Glad you're settled and happy and—"

"Happy! Do I look that?" she interrupted bitterly.

"If my memory's any good you look as gay and happy as ever."

"Your memory is bad—about that—and other things. Trueman, have you come back on a visit?"

"No; I aim to stay. I always was

comin' back."

"If you only had come!" She sighed and looked eloquently up at him. "I'm glad — terribly glad you're going to stay. We must be good friends again, True. You'll come to see me—ride with me—like you used to. Won't you?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Dabb wouldn't like that. He never had any use for me."

"It doesn't matter what he likes," returned the young woman impatiently. "Say you will, Trueman. I'm horribly lonesome."

Rock remembered that Amy had always been a flirt. Evidently she had not changed. He was sorry for her and wished to spare her discomfiture. "I'll call on you and John sometime," he replied with all friendliness.

"Me and—John! Well, your long absence in Texas hasn't made you any brighter. I dare say it hasn't changed you any — about girls, either. I saw you with Thiry Preston. At your old tricks, cowboy!"

"Did you? I don't call it old tricks to carry a few bundles for a girl," replied Rock stiffly. It annoyed him to feel the blood heat his face.

"Bundles, rot!" she retorted. "I saw you through a window and anybody could have read your mind. Oh, I know you, True Rock, inside and out. You've lost your head pronto over Thiry Preston."

"I'm not denyin' it, am I?"

"You're flaunting it like a red flag right in my face. Well, I'm telling you, cowboy, that this once you've lost your head for nothing. Thiry Preston will have none of you. I know her. She is not your kind. She's cold as ice to every cowboy on this range. Heaven knows, they've run after her."

"Thanks for that last news, anyhow," he responded dryly.

She was searching the very depths of him, her eyes keen with jealous intuition. "More. Thiry Preston has no use for lovesick cowboys, much less one like you, who've been at the beck and call of every girl in the land. And she worships that handsome devil of a brother, Ash."

"I'd hold it a virtue for a girl to love her brother—whether he was bad or good. Good day, Mrs. Dabb." Replacing his sombrero he turned away, not, however, without catching a last angry blaze of her eyes.

She would be his enemy, of that he was full sure, unless he allowed himself once more to be attached to her train. The idea was preposterous. In a few short hours—no, they were hours incalculably long in their power—he had grown past flirting with any woman. Life had suddenly become sweet, strange, full of fears and hopes, something real and poignant, such as he had never experienced before.

Rock, instead of entering the hotel, returned to Winter, whom he found unoccupied, and proceeded to unburden himself. He told the last thing first.

"So you run into Amy," meditated Sol, with a thoughtful twinkle. "Reckon you might have expected that. An' she knocked the wind out of you?"

"She sure did. You see, I'd really forgotten Amy."

"Wal, son, take my advice and keep shy of Amy. She's got old Dabb so jealous he can't attend to his business. She always has some buckaroo runnin' after her. That won't do for you. The Dabbs about own Wagontongue, not to say a lot of the range outfits. Sure John's brothers are ruled by him. I told you he bought beef from Gage Preston. Then I always see Thiry with Amy, when she comes to town. If you aim to snub your old girl for this new one—wal, son, you'll have a rough row to hoe."

"Sol, I'll not snub Amy, but I can't go playin' round with her. Sol, how much money do you owe?"

"Couple of thousand, an' when that's paid off I'll be on the road to prosperity again."

"Old-timer, you're on it right now. I'll take that much stock in your business," went on Rock, as he took out his pocketbook.

"Son, I don't want you to do that," protested Winter.

"But I want to. I think it's a good investment. Now here's your two thousand. And here's five more, which I want you to put in your bank, on interest, but fixed so you can draw it out quick. Reckon we'd better add another thousand to that five. I only need enough money to buy a spankin' outfit."

"Son, suppose somethin' happened to you," said Winter, gravely, as he fingered the money. "It might. You know this is a sudden country. An', Rock, you've got fire in your eye."

"Sol, my parents are livin', an' though old, they're in good health. They live in Illinois. I was brought up in Illinois, town of Carthage. If anythin' should happen to me—which I'm gamblin' it won't—you send this six thousand to my folks. I'll leave the address with you. Also some papers and things for safekeepin'."

"An' how about the two thousand you're investin' with me?"

"You can just forget about that, pardner."

Winter shook his lean old head sagaciously. "Wal, son, out with it. What's under that big hat?"

"I'm goin' to be a plain cowpuncher and start in where I left off here six years ago. I want a jimdandy outfit: two saddle-horses—the best on the range, if money can buy them."

"We can find one of them pron-

to," replied Winter with satisfaction. "After supper we'll walk out to Leslie's. He's sellin' out an' he has some good stock. One horse in particular. I never saw his beat. Dabb has been hagglin' with Leslie over the price. It's high, but the horse is worth it."

"How much?"

"Three hundred."

"All right, Sol. We'll buy. But I reckon one saddle-horse will do. Then I'll need a pack-horse and outfit. In the mornin' we'll pick out a tarp and blankets, grub and campin' outfit. I've got saddle, bridle, spurs, riata—all Mexican, Sol, and if they don't knock the punchers on this range, I'll eat them. My Texas pardner gave them to me. And last, I reckon I'll require some more hardware."

"Ahuh! An' with all this outfit you're headin' for Sunset Pass."

"Yeah. I'm goin' to ride down slow and easy-like. Then I'll end up at Gage Preston's and strike him for a job."

"Son, it's a bold move, if it's all on account of Thiry. Gage Preston can't hardly refuse you a job. He needs riders. He has hired about every cowpuncher on the range. But they don't last. Ash gets rid of them, sooner or later. Reckon about as soon as they shine up to Thiry."

"How does he do that?"

"Wal, he scares most of them. Some he has bunged up with his fists. An' several punchers he's driven to throw guns."

"Kill them?"

"Nope. They say he just crippled them. Ash shoots quick an' where he wants."

"Most interestin' cuss—Ash Preston," said Rock lightly.

"Son, this is what worries me," went on Winter with gravity. "It'll be some different when Ash Preston butts into you. No matter how easy an' cool you start—no matter how clever you are—it's bound to wind up a deadly business."

"Thanks, old-timer. I get your hunch. I'm takin' it serious and strong. Don't worry unreasonable about me. I've *got* to go."

Chapter Three

South to Sunset Pass

TRUEMAN ROCK was not one of the cowboy breed who cared only for pitching, biting, kicking horses. He could ride them, when exigency demanded, but he never loved a horse for other than thoroughbred qualities. And sitting on the corral fence watching Leslie's white favorite, he was bound to confess that he felt emotions of his earliest days on the range.

"Wal, True, did you ever see the beat of that hoss?" asked Sol Winter for the 20th time.

Rock shook his head silently.

Then, "I'll take him, Leslie, and consider the deal a lastin' favor," he said.

"Mrs. Dabb has been wantin' this hoss, didn't you tell me, Jim?" asked Winter.

"Wal, I reckon so. She has been out here often. But I don't think Mrs. Dabb really cared about the horse so much. She just wanted to show off with him. But today there was a girl here who loved him, an' I'd shore have liked to let her have him."

"Who was she, Jim?" asked Winter.

"Thiry Preston. She passed here today with her dad an' some of the boys. Gage stopped to have a talk with me."

"What did Miss Preston do?" queried Rock.

"She just petted the hoss while the other Prestons walked around talkin'. Miss Thiry never said a word. But I seen her heart in her eyes."

"Speaks well for her," replied Rock, as he slid off the fence and approached the animal. If this beautiful white horse had appeared desirable in his eyes upon first sight, what was he now? Rock smoothed the silky mane, thrilling at the thought that Thiry's gentle hand had rested there. "Leslie, I'll come out in the mornin'. I want a pack-horse or a mule. Here's your money. Shake on it."

"I'll throw the pack-hoss in to boot," replied Leslie.

"Sol," said Rock, thoughtfully, as they retraced their steps toward town, "do the Prestons come in often?"

"Some of them every Saturday, shore as it rolls round. Thiry comes in about twice a month."

"Pretty long ride in from Sunset. Sixty miles by trail. Reckon the Prestons make a one-night stop at some ranch?"

"No. They camp it, makin' Cedar Creek, where they turn off into a flat. Good grass an' water. There's an old cabin. It belonged to a homesteader. Preston owns it now. Thiry was tellin' me they'd fixed it up. When they're comin' to town, she an' the other women-folks sleep there, an' the men throw beds outside."

"Queer how all about these Prestons interests me so," said Rock.

"Not so queer. Leavin' Thiry aside, they're a mighty interestin' outfit," returned Winter. "You'll find that so pronto."

"Reckon I'll find out a lot pronto," said Trueman. "Never could keep things from comin' my way, particularly trouble. But, Sol, in all my life no adventure I ever rode down on could touch this one. I'm soberin' a little and realize how crazy it seems to you."

"Not crazy, son," replied Winter earnestly. "It's wild, perhaps, to let

yourself go over this girl all in a minute. But then, wild or no it might turn out good for Thiry Preston."

"Sol, why is her face so sad?"

"I don't know. I've asked her why she looks sad—which you can see when she's not speakin', but she always makes herself smile an' laugh then. Says she can't help her face an' she's sorry I don't like it. Rock, it hurts Thiry, sort of startles her, to mention that. It makes her think of somethin' unhappy."

"It's for me to find out," said Rock.

"You bet. I've always been puzzled an' troubled over Thiry. My wife, too. An' it'll please you that she took kindly to your sudden case over Thiry. True, I may be wrong thinkin' you've growed to be a man—but one last word: these Prestons have heard all about you, naturally, an' when you ride out on the range it'll all come fresh again. No cowboy ever had a finer reputation than you—for bein' keen an' honest an' clean, an' a wonder at your work. You never drank much, compared to most cowboys.

"But your gun record was bad—forgive me, son, I don't want to offend. Remember I'm your friend. Every old-timer here knows you never went around lookin' for trouble. It's not that kind of a bad reputation. It's this kind: you've spilled blood on this range, often, an' more'n once fatal. That made you loved by a few, feared an' misunderstood by many, an' a mark for every fame-huntin' sheriff, gambler, an' cowpuncher in the country.

"Now you're back again, after some years, an' all you ever done here will come up. An' your Texas doin's, whatever they were, will follow you. Now the point I want to make is this: Preston knows most of this or will know it soon, an' if he keeps you in his outfit it will be pretty strong proof that these queer dark hints from the range are without justification."

"Sol, it would seem so," replied Rock meditatively.

"Wal, it'll be good if you find it that way. For Thiry's sake first, an' then for everybody concerned. Then these hints against Preston will be little different from those concernin' other ranchers."

Rock regarded his anxious friend a thoughtful moment. "Winter, you've made a point you weren't calculatin' on. You're *hopin'* I'll find Preston one of the common run of ranchers. But you're *afraid* I won't."

It was nearly noon the following day when Rock had his pack outfit ready for travel. Leslie came up presently with the white horse.

"Black leather an' silver trimmings," said the rancher, admiringly. "Never seen him so dressed

up. An' the son-of-a-gun is smart enough to know he looks grand."

"He's smart, all right," agreed Rock, with shining eyes. "Now we'll see if he'll hang me on the fence."

The white horse took Rock's mount easily, pranced and champed a little, and tossed his head.

"Good day and good luck, rancher," said Rock, lifting the halter of the pack animal off a post.

"Same to you, cowboy," replied Leslie, heartily. "Reckon you don't need any advice about them hard nuts down in the Pass."

"Need it all right, but can't wait. When you see Sol tell him I'm off fine and dandy," rejoined Rock. With that he headed down the road which the Prestons had taken the preceding day. Before Rock was far out of town he had ascertained his horse was a fast walker and had an easy trot. For speed and endurance, Leslie had committed himself to the claim that no horse in the country could approach him.

Several hours' ride out of the town, Rock reached the top of a long slope and there halted the horses to spend a few moments in reveling in the well-remembered country.

A 30-mile gulf yawned wide and shallow, a yellow-green sea of desert grass and sage, which sloped into ridge on ridge of cedar and white grass. The length of the valley both east and west extended beyond the limit of vision, and here began the vast cattle range that made the town of Wagontongue possible.

The valley smoked with the thick amber light of the warm June day. Lonely land! Rock's heart swelled. He was coming back to the valleys and hills that he now discovered he had loved.

An hour's ride down the slow incline brought Rock into a verdant swale of 50 acres, fresh with its varied shades of green, surrounding a pretty ranch house. Here Adam Pringle had lived. If he were still there, he had verified his oft-repeated claims to Rock that here had been the making of a prosperous farm and cattle ranch.

The barn and corrals were closer to the road than the house. Rock saw a boy leading a horse, then a man at work under an open shed. The big gate leading in was shut. Rock halloed, whereupon the farmer started out leisurely, then quickened his steps. It was Adam—stalwart, middle-aged, weather-beaten settler.

"True Rock, or I'm a born sinner!" shouted Pringle.

"Howdy, Adam! How's the old-timer?" returned Rock.

"I knowed that hoss. An' I shore knowed you jest from the way you straddled him. How air you? This

is plumb a surprise. Get down an' come in."

"Haven't time, Adam. I'm rustlin' along to make camp below. Adam, you're lookin' good. I see you've made this homestead go."

"Never seen you look any better, if I remember. Thet's a hoss an' saddle you're ridin'. Whar you been?"

"Texas."

"Whar you goin'?"

"Sunset Pass."

"Cowboy, if you want work, pile right off heah."

"Thanks, Adam, but I've got a hankerin' for wilder country. I'll try Preston. Think he'll take me?"

"Shore. But don't ask him."

"Why not?"

"I'm advisin' you—not talkin'," returned the rancher, with a sharp gleam in his eye. "You know me, True."

"Used to, pretty well, Adam. And I'm sort of flustered at your advisin' me that way," replied Rock, keenly searching the other's face.

"Stay away from Sunset Pass."

"Adam, I just never could take advice," drawled Rock. "Much obliged, though. How you doin'?"

"Been on my feet these two years," returned Pringle, with satisfaction. "Been raisin' turnips an' potatoes an' some corn. Got three thousand haid of stock. An' sellin' eight hundred haid this fall."

"Bully! I'm sure tickled. Losin' much stock?"

"Some. But not enough to rare aboot. Though I'm agreed with cattlemen who know the range that there's more rustlin' than for some years past. Queer rustlin', too. You lose a few haid of steers an' then you never hear of anyone seein' hide nor hair of them again."

"Nothin' queer about that, Adam. Rustled cattle are seldom seen again," returned Rock, for the sake of argument. But there was something unusual about it. "Many new cattlemen?" he went on.

"Not too many. The range is healthy an' improvin'."

"How's Jess Slagle? I used to ride for Jess, and want to see him."

"Humph! Didn't nobody tell you aboot Slagle? He couldn't make it go in Sunset Pass after the Prestons come."

"Why not? It's sure big enough country for ten outfits."

"Wal, there's only one left, an' thet's Preston's. Ask Slagle!"

"I sure will. Is he still located in the Pass?"

"No. He's ten miles this side. Stone cabin. You'll remember it."

"If I do, that's no ranch for Jess Slagle. Marshland, what there was of it fit to graze cattle, salty water, mostly rocks and cedars."

"Your memory's good. Drop in to see Slagle. An' don't miss callin' heah when you come out."

"Which you're thinkin' won't be so very long. Huh, Adam?"

"Wal, I'm not thinkin', but if it was anyone else I'd give him three days—aboot," replied Pringle, with a guffaw.

Rock's misgivings grew in proportion to the increasing warmth and pleasure of this ride toward old haunts. The fact that nothing was spoken openly detrimental to the Prestons was a singular feature that he had encountered once or twice before. The real Westerner, such as Leslie or Pringle, was a man of few words. This reticence sprang from a consciousness that he was not wholly free from blame himself, and that to be loose with the tongue entailed considerable risk.

Rock could not prevent his growing curiosity and interest, but he succeeded in inhibiting any suspicions. He wanted to believe that Thiry's people, including the redoubtable Ash, were the very salt of the earth.

Toward sundown he reached the south slope of the valley and entered the zone of the cedars. These gray-sheathed trees, fragrant, with their massed green foliage and grotesque dead branches, seemed as much a part of a cowboy's life as grass or rocks or cactus. Rock halted for camp near a rugged little creek, where clear water ran trickling over the stones. He went off the road and threw his pack in a clump of cedars where he could not readily be seen. How long since he had camped in the open, as in his earlier days on the range!

Then he unsaddled the white, hobbled both horses, and watched them thump out in search of grass. He unrolled his tarp under a low-branching cedar, and opened his pack, conscious of pleasurable sensations. It had been years since he had done this sort of thing.

He was on his way before sunrise the next morning, and about noon he halted before the stone cabin that he knew must belong to his old friend and employer, Jess Slagle. Rock rode into what was a sorry excuse for a yard, where fences were down and dilapidated wagons, long out of use, stood around amid a litter of stones and wood. The corral in the back was a makeshift, and the log barn would have shamed a poor homesteader. It amazed and shocked Rock, though he had seen many cattlemen start well and never finish.

Dismounting, Rock went to the door and knocked. He heard steps inside. The door opened half a foot to disclose a red-haired, homely woman in dirty garb, more like a sack than a dress.

"Does Jess Slagle live here?" asked Rock.

"Yes. He's out round the barn somewheres," she replied, with a swift flash of beady eyes that took

him in.

As Rock thanked her and turned away he saw that she was barefooted. So Jess Slagle had come to squalor and poverty. Who was the woman? Rock certainly had no remembrance of her. Presently he heard the sound of hammer or ax blows on wood, and he came upon Slagle at work on a pen beside the barn.

"Howdy, Rock! I knew you were in town. Range Preston rode by this mornin' an' passed the news."

This gaunt man was Slagle, changed vastly, no doubt like his fortunes. He showed no surprise or gladness. The grasp of his hand was rough, hard, but lacked warmth or response. Rock remembered him as a heavy, florid Westerner, with clear eyes, breezy manner, smooth of face, and without a gray hair.

"Jess, I'm sure surprised and plumb sorry to find you—your condition so—so different," began Rock, a little uncertain.

"Reckon that's natural. Not much like when you rode for me, years ago," replied Slagle, with the bitterness of the defeated.

"What happened, Jess? How'd you lose out?"

"Well, Rock, I had hard luck. Two bad years for water and grass. Then Dabb shut down on me. I held the little end of a deal with him. Next I sold some cattle, put the money in a bank, an' it busted. Then Preston moved into the country—an' here I am."

"How in the devil did you get here?" demanded Rock bluntly.

"Right off I made a mistake," returned Slagle, nodding his head. "Preston was keen about my ranch in the Pass. He made me a good offer. I refused. He kept after me. I had some hard words with his son, Ash, an' it all led to a breach. They kept edgin' my stock down out of the Pass an' I didn't have the riders to drive it back. That way, then, an' in others, I fell more in debt. No banks would give me credit. I had finally to sell for about nothin'."

"To Preston?"

"Sure. No one on the lower range would take it as a gift. It was a poor location, if any other outfit rode the Pass."

"Ahuh! Then as it stands, Preston about ruined you?"

"No, Rock, I couldn't claim that. My deal with Dabb hurt me most—started me downhill. Gage Preston never did me any dirt that I actually know. When I went to him an' told him his outfit was drivin' my stock off grass an' water, he raised the very old Ned with his sons, in particular Ash Preston, who's sure rotten enough to taint the whole other twelve Prestons."

"So this Ash Preston *is* rotten?" queried Rock deliberately, glad to find one man not afraid to voice

his convictions.

"Rock, I don't talk behind any cattleman's back," returned Slagle, forcefully. "I told Gage Preston this, an' I told Ash to his face."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, the old man stalled off a shootin' match, I reckon."

"Have you ever met since?"

"Lots of times. But I've never had the nerve to draw on Ash. I know he'd kill me. He knows it, too."

"What you mean by rotten?"

"Mebbe it's a poor word. But I know what I mean. Did you ever see a slick, cold, shiny rattlesnake, just after sheddin' his skin, come slippin' out, no more afraid of you than hell, sure of himself, an' ready to sting you deep? Well, that's Ash Preston."

"Ahuh! And that's all you mean?"

"Reckon it is, Rock. I've lost cattle the last five years, some hundreds in all. But so has Preston an' other ranchers, all the way from Red Butte to the sand. There's rustlin', more perhaps than when you helped us clean out the Hartwell outfit. But sure as I am alive I never laid any of it to Ash Preston."

"I see," rejoined Rock, studying the other's mask-like face. "Glad to get your angle. I'm goin' to ask Preston for a job."

"I had a hunch you were. I'm wishin' you luck."

"Walk out with me and see my horse, Jess," rejoined Rock, turning. "Do you aim to hang on here?"

"Thank God, I don't," replied Slagle, with a first show of feeling. "My wife—she's my second wife, by the way—has had a little money an' a farm left her, in Missouri. We're leavin' before winter sets in."

"Glad to hear you've had a windfall, Jess. Now what do you think of that white horse?"

Rock had been two hours leisurely climbing the imperceptible slope up to the mouth of Sunset Pass. It was mid-afternoon. The clouds had broken somewhat and already there were tinges of gold and purple against the blue sky.

At last he entered the wide portal of the Pass, and had clear view of its magnificent reach and bold wild beauty. The winding Sunset Creek came down like a broken ribbon, bright here and dark there, to crawl at last into a gorge on Rock's left. The sentinel pines seemed to greet him.

They stood as he remembered, first one, isolated and stately, then another, and next two, and again one, and so on that way until at the height of the Pass they grew in numbers, yet apart, lording it over the few cedars on the level bench, and the log cabins strange to Rock, that he knew must be the home of the Prestons.

Many and many a time had he camped there, realizing and loving the beauty of that lovely aloof spot, yet never had he imagined it as a site for a ranch. But it was indeed the most perfect situation of any he had ever seen. And it was Thiry Preston's home.

Slowly he rode up and entered the beautiful open park. The road cut through the center and went down the outer side. Rock had a glimpse of gardens, corrals, fields, and then the purple pass threaded with winding white.

There were no rocks, no brush, no fallen logs or dead timber. The few cedars and pinons and pines stood far apart, as if distributed by a mighty landscape artist. Some of the cabins were weathered and gray, with moss green on the split singles. They had wide eaves and sturdy gray chimneys built outside, and glass windows. Other cabins were new, especially a little one, far over under the overhanging green slope and near a thin pile of white water falling from mossy rock. The largest of the pines marked this little cabin, and towered over it protectingly.

Just then a hound bayed, deep and hollow, no doubt announcing the advent of a stranger in the Pass. Rock, having come abreast of the first cabin, halted his horse.

The door of this cabin opened. A tall, lithe, belted and booted man stalked out, leisurely, his eagle-like head bare, his yellow hair waving in the wind—Ash Preston.

Chapter Four

The Thirteen Prestons

Rock felt that seldom indeed had he been looked over as he now was by this Ash Preston. No hint of recognition in that live blue gaze!

"Howdy, stranger! Off the trail?"

The omission of the invariable Western "Get down and come in," was not lost on Rock. "Howdy to you!" he returned. "Is this Gage Preston's ranch?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm on the right track. I want to see him."

"Who're you, stranger?"

"I'm Trueman Rock, late of Texas."

"Rock—are you the Rock who used to ride here before we came?"

"Reckon I am."

Ash Preston measured Rock again, a long penetrating look that was neither insolent nor curious. "You can tell me what you want with Preston. I'm his son Ash."

"Glad to meet you," said Rock pleasantly, and that was true, even if he had to feign the pleasure. "Do you run Preston's business?"

"I'm foreman here."

"Reckon my call's nothin' important," returned Rock, easily.

"But when I do call on a cattleman I want to see him."

"Are you shore it's my father you want to see most?" asked Ash, without the slightest change in tone or expression.

"Well, I'm callin' on Miss Thiry, too, for that matter," rejoined Rock. "But I'd like to see your father first."

"Miss Thiry ain't seein' every rider who comes along," said Preston. "An' dad ain't home."

"You mean *you* say he isn't home to *me?*" queried Rock deliberately.

"Wal, I didn't expect you to take it that way, but since you do we'll let it go at that."

"Excuse me, Preston, if I can't let it go at that," he returned coolly. "Would you mind tellin' me if any of the other ten Prestons are home?"

There the gauntlet went in the face of Ash Preston. Still he did not show surprise. The intense blue of his eyes, steady on Rock, changed only with a flare. Whatever he might be when drunk, when sober as now, he was slow, cold, complex, cunning. He was flint, singularly charged with fire. Rock would have felt easier in mind if Preston had shown less strength and perception. But he gave Rock the same status that Rock gave him. It augured ill for the future.

"Wal, Rock, all the Prestons are home, if you're so set on knowin'," returned Ash. "But there's one of the thirteen who's advisin' you to dust down the road."

"Reckon that must be you, Mister Ash?"

"An' that's shore me."

"Well, I'm sorry. I don't know you. And sure you don't know me. I can't ever have offended you. Why are you so uncivil?"

Preston's glance, straying over Rock, and the flashy saddle and beautiful horse, betrayed something akin to disfavor, but he did not commit himself further than to make a slight gesture, indicating the road down the Pass.

"Plain as print," went on Rock bluntly. "But I'm not takin' your hunch, Ash Preston. I'll stay long enough, anyhow, to see if the rest of your family is as rude to a stranger as you are."

In one sliding step Rock reached the ground. And at that instant heavy boots crunched the gravel.

"Hey, Ash, who're you palaverin' with?" called a deep, hearty voice.

Ash wheeled on his heel, as on an oiled pivot, and without answer strode back into the cabin, to slam the door. Then Rock turned to see who had intervened. He saw a man of massive build, in the plain garb of an everyday cattleman. Rock perceived at once that he was father to Thiry and Range Preston, but there seemed no resemblance to Ash. He might have been 50

years old. Handsome in a bold way, he had a smooth hard face, bulging chin, well-formed large lips, and great deep gray eyes.

"Stranger, I reckon Ash wasn't welcomin' you with open arms," he said.

"Not exactly. You're Gage Preston?"

"Shore am, young man. Did you want to see me?"

"Yes, I asked for you. He said you weren't home."

"Doggone Ash, anyhow," replied the rancher, with impatient good-humor. "Whenever a cowpuncher rides in hyar, Ash tells him we've got smallpox or such like. He's not sociable. But you mustn't judge us other Prestons by him."

"I was tryin' to argue with him on that very chance," said Rock, smilingly.

"Hope Ash didn't take you for a hoss thief. Course he knowed Leslie's white hoss. We seen him only yesterday."

"Well, your son didn't say. But I reckon he thought so. I bought this horse from Leslie."

"Grand hoss he is, you lucky rider," replied Preston, with a huge hand on the white flank. "Hyar, Tom," he called, turning toward a lanky youth in the background, "take these hosses. Throw saddle an' pack on the porch of the empty cabin. Wal, stranger, you're down, so come in."

Rock had not noticed that the next cabin, some distance away under the pines, was a double one of the picturesque kind, long, with wide eaves, a porch all around, and ample space between the two log structures. Evidently the second cabin was a kitchen. But both had large stone chimneys. Deer and elk antlers, saddles and skins, hung on the walls between the cabins. Table and benches there indicated where the Prestons dined.

"Reckon it'll be pleasanter sittin' outside," said Preston, and invited Rock to a rustic seat. "What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say—yet," laughed Rock. He liked Preston, and could not help but compare the son most disparagingly with the father.

"Thiry didn't tell me either," went on the rancher. "But I know you're the young fellar who was polite to her an' did somethin' or other for her thet made Ash huffy."

"Yes, I am. It wasn't much, certainly nothin' to offend Miss Thiry's brother."

"Aw, Ash was drunk. An' he shore ain't no credit to us then. Young man, I'll say you didn't lose any time trailin' Thiry up," went on Preston quizzically, with a twinkle in his big gray eyes.

"Mr. Preston, you—I—I—" began Rock, somewhat disconcerted.

"You needn't lie about it. Lord knows this hyar has happened a

hundred times. An' don't call me mister. Make it plain Preston, an' Gage when you feel acquainted enough. You're not tryin' to tell me you didn't foller Thiry out hyar."

"No—not exactly. I came to ask you for a job."

"Good. What'll you work fer?"

"Reckon the same as you pay any other rider. I'm an old hand with ropes, horses, cattle—anything about the range."

"Wal, you're hired. I'm shore in need of a man who can handle the boys. I run two outfits. Ash bosses the older riders. If you fit in with the youngsters it'll shore be a load off my mind."

"That suits me fine. I reckon I can hold up the job."

"Wal, you strike me all right. But I gotta tell you thet no young man I ever hired struck Ash right. An' none of them ever lasted."

"Preston, if I turn out to be of value to you, will *you* want me to last?" queried Rock, and this was the straight language of one Westerner to another.

"Wal, I like your talk an' I like your looks. An' I'll say if you can handle my boys an' stick it out in the face of Ash, I'll be some in your debt."

"I don't know Ash, of course. But I can take a hunch, if you'll give it."

"Wal, Ash sees red whenever any puncher looks at Thiry. He cares fer nothin' on earth but thet girl. An' she's awful fond of him. She's never had a beau. An' Thiry's near twenty-two."

"Good heavens! Is her brother so jealous he won't let any man look at her?"

"Wal, he wouldn't if he could prevent it—thet's daid shore. An' far as the ranch hyar is concerned he does prevent. But when Thiry goes to town accidents happen, like you meetin' up with her. Thet riles Ash."

"In that case, Preston, I'm afraid Ash will get riled out here. For I reckon the same kind of accident may happen."

"Hum! Hum! You're a cool hand to draw to. What'd you say your name was?"

"I haven't told you yet. It's Trueman Rock, late of Texas. But I used to ride here."

The rancher apparently met with instant check to his mood. "What? Trueman Rock!—Are you thet there True Rock who figgered in gun-play hyar years ago?"

"Sorry I can't deny it, Preston."

"You rode fer Slagle—when he had his ranch down hyar below in the Pass? It was you who run down thet Hartwell rustlin' outfit?"

"I can't take all the credit. But I was there when it happened."

"Say, man, I've heerd aboot you all these years. Damn funny I didn't

savvy who you were."

"It's been six years since I left here—and perhaps you heard some things not quite fair to me."

"Never heerd a word thet I'd hold against you. Come now, an' meet these hyar eleven other Prestons."

Rock faced the ordeal with mingled emotions, chiefly concerning Thiry, but with nothing of the inhibition he had labored under while encountering Ash. Thiry, however, to his keen disappointment, was not one of the half dozen Prestons who answered the rancher's cheery call.

Mrs. Preston appeared a worthy mate for this virile cattleman. She was buxom and comely, fair like all of them, and some years younger than Preston.

"Ma, this is Trueman Rock, who's come to ride fer me," announced Preston. Then he presented Rock to Alice, a girl of 16, not by any means lacking the good looks that appeared to run in the family. She was shy, but curious and friendly. Rock took instantly to the ragged, barefooted, big-eyed children, Lucy and Burr; and signs were not wholly wanting that they were going to like him.

"Where's Thiry?" asked the rancher.

"She's ironin', Dad," replied Alice.

"Wal, didn't she hyar me call?"

"Reckon she did, Pa, for you'd 'most woke the daid," replied his wife, and going to the door of the second cabin she called, "Thiry, we've company, an' Pa wants you."

Whereupon Thiry appeared in the door in a long blue apron that scarcely hid her graceful symmetry. Her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow of shapely arms. She came out reluctantly, with troubled eyes and a little frown. She showed no surprise. She had seen him through the window.

"Good afternoon, Miss Preston," greeted Trueman, evincing but little of the pleasure that consumed him.

"Oh, it's Mr. Rock, our new grocery clerk," she responded, with manner and tone that was a little beyond Trueman. "How do you do! And aren't you lost way out here?"

"Hey, Rock, what's thet aboot you bein' a grocery clerk? I reckoned I was hirin' a cowboy."

Whereupon Rock had to explain that he had been keeping store for Sol Winter when Thiry happened in. Thiry did not share in the laughter. Rock thought he saw the gray eyes quicken and darken as she glanced swiftly from him to her father.

"Thiry, he's goin' to handle the boys," replied Preston, as if in answer to a mute query.

"You are a—a cowboy, then," she

said to Rock, struggling to hide confusion or concern. "You don't know the job you've undertaken. What did my brother Ash say? I saw you talking with him."

"He was tellin' me your dad would sure give me a job—and that you'd be glad," replied Trueman, with the most disarming assurance.

"Yes, he was," retorted Thiry, blushing at the general laugh.

"You're right, Miss Preston," returned Rock ruefully. "Your brother was not—well, quite taken with my visit. He told me you didn't see every rider who came along. And that your father was not home. And that—"

"We apologize for Ash's rudeness," interposed Thiry hurriedly. She had not been able to meet Rock's gaze.

"Never mind, Rock. It's nothin' to be hurt about," added Preston. "Ash is a queer, unsociable fellar. But you're shore welcome to the rest of us. Thiry, if you never heerd of True Rock, I want to tell you he's been one of the greatest riders of this range. An' I need him bad, in more ways than one."

"Oh, Dad, I—I didn't mean—I—of course I'm glad if you are," she returned hurriedly. "Please excuse me now. I've so much work."

Somehow Trueman divined that she was not glad; or if she were, it was owing to her father's need, and then it was not whole-hearted. But the youngsters saved him. They sidled over to him and began to ply him with questions about the white horse, which had captivated their eyes.

"What you call him?" asked Burr.

"Well, the fact is I haven't named him yet," replied Rock, surprised at the omission. "Can you think of a good one? What do you say, Lucy?"

"I like what Thiry calls him," she said, shyly.

"Your sister has a name for him? Well, that's nice. Tell me. Maybe I'll like it," said Trueman, with a feeling of duplicity.

"Egypt," announced Lucy impressively. "Isn't that just grand?"

"Egypt?—Oh, I see. Because he's like one of the white stallions of the Arabians. I think it's pretty good. We'll call him Egypt."

"That'll tickle Thiry. I'll tell her," cried the child joyously, running into the kitchen.

Rock contrived, while letting Burr drag him round to look at the antlers of deer and elk, to catch a glimpse of Thiry at her work. She was alone in there, for Lucy had come running out. Rock thought she looked very sweet and domestic and capable. On the way back round the porch he stopped a moment to have another glimpse. This time she glanced up and caught him. Rock essayed to smile and pass

on, to make his action seem casual.

But her gaze held him stock-still, and it was certain he could not find a ready smile. She ceased her ironing and transfixed him with great eyes of wonder and reproach, almost resentment. She accused him, she blamed him for coming. He had brought her more trouble. Rock was so roused that he forgot himself and returned her look with all the amazement and entreaty he felt. Then the paleness of her face seemed suddenly blotted out; hastily she bent again to her work.

"Come, Rock, let me show you the ranch," called Preston. "We're shore some proud of it."

"You ought to be. I've seen a sight of ranches, but this one is the finest," returned Rock, as he left the porch.

"Pa, soon as Thiry's done we'll have supper, so don't go far," spoke up Mrs. Preston.

"All right, Ma. I reckon Rock couldn't be driv very far," replied the rancher, drawing Rock away. "When we first come hyar, aboot five years ago, Slagle, as you know, lived down below. He wouldn't sell, an' he swore this divide was on his land. But it wasn't, because he'd homesteaded a hundred an' sixty acres, an' his land didn't come halfway up. Wal, we throwed up a big cabin, an' we all lived in it for a while. The kids were pretty small then. Next I tore thet cabin down an' built the double one, an' this one hyar, which Ash has to himself. He won't sleep with nobody. Lately we throwed up four more, an' now we're shore comfortable."

The little cabin over by the creek under the largest of the pines was occupied by Alice and Thiry, and they, according to Preston, had just about put that cabin up themselves. But Rock's quick eye gathered at once that Preston or some one of his sons was something of an architect and a most efficient carpenter.

The grassy divide sloped gradually to the west, and down below the level, where cedars grew thicker and the pines thinned out, were the corrals and barns and open sheds, substantial and well built. Rock found his white horse in one of the corrals, surrounded by three lanky youths from 16 to 20 years old. Preston introduced them as the inseparable three, Tom, Albert, and Harry. They had the Preston fairness, and Tom and Harry were twins.

"Rock, if you can tell which is Tom an' which is Harry, you'll do more'n anyone outside the family."

"Son-of-a-gun if I can tell now, lookin' right at them," ejaculated Rock.

The barns were stuffed full of hay and fodder, some of it freshly cut. A huge bin showed a reserve of last year's corn. Wagons and harnesses were new; a row of saddles

hung opposite a dozen stalls, where the Prestons no doubt kept their best horses. But these were empty now. A long fenced lane ran down to pastures. Horses were whistling down there, cows mooing, calves bawling.

Both money and labor had been lavished on this ranch; and it was something to open the eyes of old-time homesteaders like Slagle. Even prosperity would not have induced Slagle to such extremes of improvement.

"Preston, if I owned this ranch I'd never leave it a single day," was Rock's eloquent encomium.

"Wal, I'd shore hate to leave it myself," returned the other tersely.

"How many cattle have you?" queried Rock, because he knew this was a natural question.

"Don't have much idee. Ten thousand haid, Ash says. We run three herds, the small one down on the Flats, another hyar in the Pass, an' the third an' big herd up in the Foothills."

"Naturally the third means the big job," said Rock.

"Shore will be for you boys. Thar's a lot of cattle over thar thet ain't mine. Ash said eighty thousand haid all told in the Foothills. But thet's his exaggerated figurin'."

"Gee! So many? Who's in on that range beside you?"

"Wal, thar's several heavy owners, like Dabb, Lincoln, Hesbitt, an' then a slew of others, from homesteaders like Slagle an' Pringle to two-bit cowpuncher rustlers. It's sort of a bad mess over thar. An' some of the outfits haven't no use fer mine."

"Ha! That's old cowboy breed. You can't ever change it. I know Lincoln. But Hesbitt is a new one on me."

"Yes, he came in soon after me," replied Preston shortly. His speech, to Rock's calculating perceptions, had lost heartiness and spontaneity. But Rock doubted that he would have observed this subtle little difference had he not come to Sunset Pass peculiarly stimulated by curiosity.

"Sol Winter told me you'd worked a new wrinkle on the range," went on Rock matter-of-factly. "Wholesale butcherin'."

"Yes. Always did go in fer thet. Hyar in this country I first set in killin' an' sellin' to local butchers. Then I got to shippin' beef to other towns not far along the railroad. An' all told I've made it pay a little better than sellin' on the hoof."

"Reckon it's a heap harder work."

"We Prestons ain't afraid of work," said the rancher. "But it takes some managin' as well. I made a slaughter-house out of Slagle's place, an' then we do some butcherin' out on the range."

"What stumps me, Preston, is

how you get beef to town in any quantity," responded Rock.

"Easy for Missourians on these hard roads. We got big wagons an' four-hoss teams. In hot summer we drive at night."

"So you're from Missouri," went on Rock, with geniality. "I sort of figured you were. I once worked with an outfit of Missourians. They have a lingo of their own, somethin' like Texans. Better educated, though."

"My girl Thiry went to school till she was seventeen," Preston spoke with pride. "But the rest of them had little schoolin' 'cept what Thiry has taught them out hyar. Wal, you'll want to unpack an' wash up fer supper."

It was just sunset when Rock came out of the cabin assigned him. Sitting down on the stone steps of the porch, he found there was an open place between the trees permitting unbroken view of the Pass.

Here, striking him like an invisible force in the air, was the wild scene famous among riders all over the Southwest. Rock had been asked about Sunset Pass more than once while he was in Texas.

A bell called Rock to supper. When he reached the cabin, to find the Preston boys straddling the benches, it was to be accosted by the rancher.

"Say, cowboy, when you hyar the supper bell you come a-r'arin'. Never wait for a second bell."

"Did you have to ring a second bell for me?"

"I did—or you'd have missed your supper," returned Thiry. She was standing near where Preston sat at the head of the table. Her face seemed to catch the afterglow of sunset, and her eyes, too.

"Thanks. I'm sorry to be late. I didn't hear. Guess I was lost in the sunset."

"Wal, it wasn't its best tonight. Too much sun. Rock, you set hyar on my right. Thet'll put you across from Thiry. Are we all hyar? Whar's Ash?"

"He rode off somewheres," replied one of the boys.

"Wal, Rock, meet Range Preston, an' thet's his real name—an' Scoot, which is short for some handle Ma gave him once—an' Boots, whose proper name is Frank. Boys, this is Trueman Rock."

Preston's humorous introduction, and Rock's friendly response, elicited only a "Howdy" from each of these older sons.

"Reckon we can eat now," added Preston. "Set down, Rock, an' pitch in."

The long table was bountifully spread, steaming, savory. Mrs. Preston sat at the foot, with Lucy on one side and Burr on the other. Alice's place was next to Rock, and she most solicitously served him.

There was hardly any unneces-

sary conversation. The male contingent, Rock observed, devoted themselves to the supper, like any other hungry cowboys. Presently Rock stole a glance at Thiry, to catch her eyes on him. That made him so happy he did not dare risk another. But he could see her plate, and that the food on it diminished slowly. She was not hungry. His coming to Sunset Pass had unaccountably troubled her.

It puzzled and annoyed Rock. It was far from flattering. He was not such a cad that he would impose himself upon a girl who disliked him on first sight. But Rock could not believe that could be wholly true. What had he done to deserve that?

When supper ended, dusk had just fallen. It was not going to be very dark, at least early in the evening, for a half-moon soared out from under the white fleecy clouds.

Rock sat on the edge of the porch, attended again by the children. The older sons stalked away while the younger lingered, evidently accepting the newcomer. The womenfolk, except Thiry, who had gone into the other cabin with her father, were in the kitchen.

Presently the rancher came out alone. "Boys, hyar's some work fer you to break Rock in on tomorrow," he said. "Grease the wheels of the green wagon. Then hitch up an' go down to the slaughter-house. Fold tight an' pack all the hides thet are dry. Haul them up to the barn. An' Tom, next mornin' soon as it's light you hitch up again an' drive down an' meet us at the Flats. Then you come back home."

"All right, Pa," drawled Tom.

"Rock, thet doesn't sound much like work to you. But your job is to keep these three harum scarums from ridin' off into the woods. You'll have your hands full, fer they're shore Indians."

"Boss, if I can't hold them in I'll do the work myself," replied Rock.

Before the hour passed, Mrs. Preston and Alice came out, and Thiry, too, and they all sat around on the porch and grass enjoying the cool breeze coming up the Pass. The moon shone brighter as the clouds grew more open. There were moments of pale gloom, then a long interval of silver light.

The shadow of the pines on the white grass fascinated Rock. And presently he found that being there, except for the silent Thiry so disturbing to him, was no different from being in the company of most any hospitable Western family. The discordant note—Ash Preston—was absent. Rock made himself as agreeable as he knew how, to the youngsters especially, and then to the mother, who responded readily.

Preston retired within his cabin, and soon after the boys slouched away. Trueman rose to say good

night.

Thiry had been standing some moments, in the shadow of the cabin, apparently listening. "Mr. Rock, would you like to walk with me to my cabin?" she asked.

"Why—pleased, I'm sure," replied Rock, haltingly, scarce able to conceal his joy. What old-fashioned courtesy! Good nights were exchanged, and Rock found himself walking away under the great dark pines, in the shadowed moonlight, with Thiry beside him.

Chapter Five

Rock's Dilemma

Thiry walked beside him, slender, light-stepping, with her profile showing clear-cut and cold in the moonlight. As she did not speak, Trueman dismissed the idea that her invitation was simply an old-fashioned courtesy. Therefore he made no attempt at conversation. When they had covered most of the distance to her cabin, without exchanging a single word, he felt anew and provokingly the growing excitement of this situation.

At last she slowed her step, hesitated, and halted under the magnificent pine tree that made dark shade around her cabin. Outside the circle there were spaces of silver moonlight, and then streaks and bars of black shadow across the light. The night wind breathed in the huge spreading mass of foliage overhead. How supernaturally beautiful the place and moment!

The girl confronted Trueman, and her face had the sheen of the moonlight, her eyes the darkness and mystery of the shade. "Mr. Rock, I want to talk to you," she said very quietly.

"Yes?" rejoined Trueman encouragingly, but he was not in the least encouraged.

"Have you been—wholly honest in coming out here to Sunset Pass?" she asked, gravely.

"Honest! What do you mean?" flashed Rock, his pride cut and his blissful anticipations fading.

"What did you tell Father?"

"I asked for a job."

"Did you let him believe the job was your sole reason for coming?"

"No. He said I hadn't been long in trailin' you up. He was good-natured and nice. So I didn't deny it. I laughed and agreed with him."

"Oh—you did!" she exclaimed, somehow shaken out of her reserve. "That's different. I apologize."

"Miss Preston, you don't owe me any apology."

"Yes, I do. I thought you'd deceived Dad—the same as so many riders have done."

Rock had averted his face. He was astounded and hurt, suddenly, coldly checked in his romantic imaginings. What manner of girl was

this Thiry Preston? It might be that she was a worthy sister to unsociable Ash Preston. But that resentful thought could not abide with his loyalty.

"Mr. Rock, do you remember the last moment, when you were with me at the corral in Wagontongue?" she asked.

"I'm not likely to forget it," he returned.

"You looked something at me. You didn't say so, but you meant you'd see me again. Now didn't you? Honest?"

"Miss Preston, I—I certainly did," answered Rock hastily. "But, indeed, I didn't mean to be rude or—or bold."

"I don't think you were either," she said, earnestly. "I— We might sit down," she suggested, indicating a rustic bench under the pine. "I am tired."

The bench appeared to catch a gleam of shadowed moonlight. Thiry could here be seen more clearly than while she stood in the shade. Rock preferred to stand, and he wished he could not see her so well.

"Mr. Rock, please don't misunderstand," she began, looking up. "I was far from being insulted or even offended that day in the store and at the corral. At the last, there, you meant you'd see me again. And you've done it. Now we're concerned with that."

"Reckon I might have waited a decent little while," responded Rock, as she paused. "But I never met a girl like you. I wanted to see you again—soon. Where's the harm?"

"Indeed there isn't any harm *in* it, Mr. Rock, but harm can come *from* it."

"How?"

"Through my brother Ash."

"Well, that's not hard to believe," rejoined Rock, with sharpness. "The other day he was a drunken, vulgar lout. He ought to have been kicked out of that corral, and I'd have done it but for you. Today, when he was sober, he was a different proposition to meet. He was cold, mean, vicious. He had no hospitality of the West—no idea what was due a tired and hungry stranger. But at that I'd prefer him drunk. In my day on the range I've met some—"

Trueman bit his tongue. The girl had suddenly covered her face with her hands.

"Aw, Miss Preston, forgive me," he burst out. "I didn't mean to distress you. I just spoke out quick, without thinkin'—"

She drew her hands away and lifted her head. "You're quite right—Mr. Rock," she said unsteadily. "Ash is—all that you say. To my shame I confess it. All my life I've made excuses for him. It's no use. I—I cannot do it—any more.

But that's not the point."

Rock sat down beside her, his anger flown, but there was another kind of heat running along his veins. How this girl must love her brother!

"I know. The point was the harm that might come through Ash. Please be frank with me. If I've brought this distress upon you, I'm entitled to know why."

"I've always been very—very fond of Ash," she said tremulously, struggling for a composure that would not return. "Partly because he was always so bad—and I seemed the only one who could influence him for good. Ash cares for nothing but me. Not for father, mother, brothers, or his other sisters. He hates men—he hates horses—he hates cattle. I—I've stuck to him until now I—I— Mr. Rock, I can't tell you."

"Spare yourself, Miss Preston," returned Rock impulsively. "It's wonderful—beautiful of you. I admire and respect you for it. But I can't understand."

"No one can," she said, sadly. "Alice thinks I'm mad. Oh, how I dread this! But it has to be done—more with you than with any other who ever tried to be friends with me. I've known lots of boys, and liked them, too. But not lately. As I grow older Ash grows more jealous. He fears I might like some cowboy."

"Oh, I see! Is such a remarkable thing possible?" returned Rock, unable to resist a slight sarcasm.

"Of course it is," she retorted. Her eyes flashed at him. "What do you think I am, anyway?"'

"Under the present circumstances I reckon I dare not tell you."

"Mr. Rock, you are going to disappoint me presently."

"Good heavens! What do you think I am, anyway?" retorted Rock, in turn, growing almost desperate.

"I make a good deal of what Mother and Alice and Dad think," she said gently.

"Well, what's that?" he queried, suddenly mollified. She could do anything with him.

"I would dare tell you, but it would only make this unfortunate situation worse. I only hint of it—because it's not fair to let you think we—or I—dislike you."

"Oh, then you don't?"

"No. I—I think I really like you, though it's such short notice for me. And, Mr. Rock, if I had my way, I'd like to be friends with you."

"Thank you, Miss Thiry," he returned gratefully, swayed by her unexpected avowal. "Honest, I didn't hope for so much. All I wanted was a *chance* to prove I could deserve you—your friendship."

"I—I dare say you could," she re-

turned, looking away. "Mr. Winter used to tell me about you. Then Dad—I never saw him taken with anyone as he is with you. But the thing is I *can't* be friends with you."

"Because of Ash?"

"Yes. He will not let any boy or man be friends with me—at least out here at Sunset. Cowboys have called on me here and many have come to ride for Dad. Ash soon got rid of them."

"I wonder how he did all that. I know cowboys well, where a pretty girl is concerned. And I'm just curious."

"I'll tell you. Ash has chased them away in every conceivable manner. He's lied, as he lied to you about my not seeing riders who came to Sunset. He'd coolly invite them to leave. He'd bluff. He'd threaten. He'd cripple and shoot their horses. Oh, that was the vilest thing! He'd get them drunk while on guard—which Dad couldn't forgive. He'd ridicule any sensitive cowboy before the outfit—so terribly that the poor fellow would leave. He'd concoct devilish schemes to make a cowboy seem negligent or crooked. And as a last resource he'd pick fights. Oh, he has beaten several cowboys brutally. Then worst of all—he has thrown his gun on more than one. Archie Black will be a cripple for life. And Jack Worthington nearly died of a gun-shot."

"How very interestin'!" exclaimed Rock, and for the life of him he could not keep his voice normal. "And has nothin' ever happened to this bully?"

"Oh, Ash didn't always come out scot-free. But nothing to bother him. I don't believe Ash has nerves or heart or feeling."

"Yet you love him!" ejaculated Rock bitterly.

"I do—more because I seem the only one. But it's not so much that. I've kept him from going to the bad."

"How could he be any worse?" asked Trueman incredulously.

"Oh, he could be. You don't know—you can't understand. But I do."

"Miss Thiry, have you been so vastly concerned for the good health of all these poor lovesick cowboys as you seem about mine?" asked Rock.

"You are sarcastic again. Oh, you're not—so nice as I thought you'd be. Yes, I was concerned—worried about these boys. But I've never been so—so scared as I am over your coming."

"Scared! For me?"

"Yes, for you—a little. Oh, I can't lie to you. I'm scared because of the—the harm that may come—if you stay."

"A little! How nice of you! All you think of is poor dear Brother. Thanks, Miss Preston. I'm begin-

nin' to believe I idealized you rather high."

"You're perfectly horrid!" she cried passionately. "Yes, indeed, you must have idealized me beyond my merits."

Rock leaned closer to study the lovely face, the deep eyes that flamed at him yet tried to hide true feelings. He could speak bitter words, but was instantly full of remorse. Yet how sweet to hurt her! "Look me straight in the eyes," he said suddenly. "You can't—you can't."

"Why—you—certainly I can," she returned, startled. And she did, gravely, tragically. What a marvelous abyss Trueman Rock gazed into! He lost himself there. "You said you couldn't lie?" queried Rock cruelly, overcome by his own catastrophe.

"I never told—a—a—black lie in my life," she faltered, with her head lifting.

"Then—are *you* honest with me? What is the reason you want me to run off like a coward?"

"I've been trying to tell you," she replied, hastily ignoring his first query, which he saw had made her start. "But I don't want you to be a coward. I'd think it brave, generous, to help me. I told you and I tell you again harm, terrible harm, might come of this, if you stay. Ash will not try any of his tricks on you. For you are different. Why, my dad said to me, not an hour ago, 'There, lass, is a cowboy whose face Ash won't rub in the dirt. An' he won't be throwin' guns around so careless. True Rock is a different kind of a hombre from all those Ash has stacked up against.' I was thunderstruck. It seemed almost as if Dad was *glad*. I never saw him speak like that. And lightning flashed from his eyes.

"Oh, this spurred me to speak with you. Can't you see? You are different. You're a man—and one with a—a—please forgive—a bloody record. I don't despise you because of that. Since I've lived West I've learned there are bad gunmen and good gunmen. My brother Ash is one kind—you are the other."

"Thiry Preston, first you are cruel, then you are kind," replied Rock hoarsely, as she paused to catch her breath, with a hand pressed upon her heart. "If you want to drive me away I advise you to keep on bein' cruel."

She was in the grip of strong emotion now, beautiful and soul-moving to Rock. "You wouldn't stay here—with us—and—and leave me alone?" she asked, with a simplicity wholly free of vanity.

"Yes, I might—if you cut me cold or slammed the door in my face," he answered.

"That I couldn't do. If you stay on, living here and eating at our table, I could not help but talk to

you, be with you some. I think it would be nice—if Ash wasn't around. I—I'm afraid I might like you. There isn't any reason why I shouldn't. Now, if you stayed—you'd—you'd—"

She broke off as if unable to find adequate expression. But her voice, her look, were more than sufficient to make Rock fight temptation. How easy to lie to this innocent girl! He could do that and stay on here, and deceive Ash Preston, too.

"Yes, Miss Thiry, I would," he returned swiftly, to get by the danger. "I would be a very great deal worse than any cowboy you ever knew."

"So—you see," she said, entreatingly. "Then you and Ash would fight over me. First with fists, probably, like a couple of beasts. Then with guns! Oh, that's the horror of it—there would be blood spilled. He might kill you, which would be terrible. But most likely you would kill *him*."

"Suppose I did?" flashed Rock, torn between pity and jealousy.

She leaped up to stand rigid, with clenched hands and swelling bosom, with such blazing eyes of passion that he was stunned.

"Miss Thiry, forgive me again," he pleaded. "Please sit down. That was only my temper. I hope I'll never get into *any* kind of a fight with Ash."

"Oh, what are good intentions to men—where a woman is concerned? You couldn't keep out of it. You have a fiery temper. And Ash—that devil would make a saint fight."

"I'll just make up my mind I won't fight. I'll keep out of his way. I'll do anythin' for you."

"But you've only seen me once!" she exclaimed despairingly.

"I'm not committin' myself yet, because I'd hate to embarrass you more without bein' sure. But I'm afraid, if seein' you the other day wasn't enough, this time *is*."

"Oh, please go away tomorrow—before it's too late," she implored.

"You want me to go as bad as that?" asked Rock, weakening.

"I beg you to. I've begun to be afraid of you, and I wasn't at first. You're so sharp—so keen. You'll—" Suddenly in her agitation, she jerked a hand to her lips, as if to silence them. Her eyes dilated. She stared up at Rock like a child who had almost betrayed herself.

Rock, if he did not read her mind, had intuition enough to grasp that part of Thiry's fear, perhaps the greater, was not due to the inevitable clash between him and Ash. She was afraid he would find out something. Rock hastened to thrust the insidious thought from him. "Afraid of me!" he ejaculated hurriedly. "Why, Thiry — Miss Thiry, that's absurd! Right this minute I'm the best friend you have

in the world."

"Then prove it," she said, bending closer.

"How?"

"Go away tomorrow."

"And never see you again?"

"It would be best," she returned, and looked away. "But I didn't say you'd never see me again. Perhaps I—we might meet in town. I'm going in over the Fourth. Mrs. Dabb is to give a dance. I could see you there."

At that Rock laughed rather wildly. "At Amy Wund's house? Not much!"

"Then at the dance. It won't be at her house. I—I'll go with you—if you ask me."

"Don't bribe me to run off from Sunset Pass," he said. "But thank you for sayin' you'd go with me. I'd like to. But I'm not invited and don't expect to be."

"I'll see you get an invitation, Mr. Rock."

"Don't tempt me. I'd almost give my head to take you to a dance. I'd almost quit my job here and then come back to it again."

"But that would be a lie."

"Well, I might lie, too. I don't mean *to* you, but *for* you."

"Please, Mr. Rock, go away tomorrow before trouble comes. I'll never be able to thank you enough. It's the only chance you have to be my—my friend."

"You're a queer, wonderful girl," he replied, puzzled and sad.

"I will come to town oftener—then," she almost whispered.

"You'd meet me in town and hope to deceive Ash?"

"Yes. I—I'll try," she faltered.

"But he'd find it out. You can't fool that hombre. Then he would have a real case against me. He'd hunt me down, force me to meet him."

"Oh!"

"If I give in to you and leave Sunset Pass, I'd never willingly see you again," he went on, with more bitterness.

"Mr. Rock, that wouldn't be such a—a loss to you as you imagine now," she answered.

"I don't know. All I know is that I hate to refuse you anythin'. Listen. There's two sides to this deal, and here's mine." He leaned close so that he could see her better in the pale shadow. "I want you to know about me. I was born in Illinois. My mother and father are livin'. They're quite old now. I was home five years ago. I have a sister. She ought to be nineteen now—a fine, pretty girl. Well, I went to school till we moved out West. Then I went to ridin'. My father lost out in the cattle business and took the family back home. I stayed. That was—fourteen—sixteen years ago.

"Durin' these sixteen years I've lived the life of a wanderin', ridin',

drinkin', fightin' cowboy. I stuck here on this range longest of all. I don't say I was bad, but I wasn't much good. I was always gettin' in trouble for other people. That's how I came to shoot Pickins. It was a good riddance. But the sheriff then—Cass Seward—was a friend of Pickins's. I didn't want to kill Seward, so I left Wagontongue. I stayed away six years, then had to come back. I got there the day I met you. Found out Seward was gone. Found out a lot of other things. I wanted to know about my old girls.

"I had always been crazy over pretty girls. Sol Winter told me a lot of bad news about the girls—and about his son Nick. So I lost my happy mood. I wanted to go out and get drunk. Sol asked me to keep store for him. And I sat there sinkin' into one of the old black spells that had kept me from makin' someone out of myself. Then you walked in that store. And I didn't want to go out and get drunk. Somethin' happened. I don't know yet what it was. But it was wonderful. Sure you remember how funny I was? I'm sure not so funny now," he went on, with dark passion. "Somethin' happened to me. It's been such a tearin', changin' somethin' that I don't know myself. I'm findin' out little by little. Seein' you this second time has helped a lot. I'll make a clean breast of all —soon as I know. But right now I know—if you don't turn your back on me—I'll never drink again. Or hunt for a fight! Or waste my time and money!"

"Mr.—Rock!" she exclaimed, rising, low-voiced and trembling. "Are you telling me you—you love me?"

"No, I'm not tellin' you that," he returned doggedly. "But I'm sure afraid somethin's terrible wrong. Miss Thiry, please—please don't make me go away."

"Could I make you do anything? How silly! But if you're manly enough to save me misery, you will go."

"That's hittin' hard. Suppose I get it into my mind that by *stayin'* I can save you *more* misery?"

"Mr. Rock!" she cried, shocked.

His sudden query had been a random shot, but it struck home. Rock's heart leaped. He had to stifle a wild impulse. "*Quien sabe?* I might," he returned, almost coldly. "Give me a day to think over whether I'll go or stay. Reckon so far the fight's one-sided and in your favor. I'll meet you tomorrow night and tell you."

"Tomorrow night. Here at this hour?" she returned, rising from the seat.

"Yes. Good night, Miss Preston."

"I'm very, very sorry— Good night."

Rock gave her one long look as

she stood now in the moonlight. He would carry that picture in his heart of hearts all his days. Then he strode away, and when he turned, at quite some distance, she was still standing like a white statue.

He made his bed on the porch, so that he could lie there and watch the moon, and think over this maddening situation.

For hours it seemed he never got anywhere, so far as decision was concerned. His mind was chaotic. The moon soared white and grand above the pines and the night wind roared. Coyotes mourned eerily. A deep-voiced hound bayed them in answer. A low soft murmur of running water came to him in the lulls of the wind.

At last he admitted that he loved Thiry Preston. Time was nothing. He had always known her, and though the hours were but few since their actual meeting, he was now measuring their incomprehensible length and fullness. But he hated the idea that he only loved her. That was putting her with the others. His love for Amy, Polly, and Kit had merely been growing pangs toward this real and beautiful thing.

It was great and would suffice Rock for all time. Not one second longer did he hesitate about sacrificing himself for her happiness.

This resolve cleared his mind of vacillation and bewilderment and conflicting tides of emotion. The rest was easy and required only intelligence. If he could best serve Thiry Preston by passing out of her life as quickly as he had come into it he would do so. But he had a strange persistent recurrence of a doubt. He recalled her words, her looks, her actions, and relentlessly analyzed them. His love, once acknowledged, incited and stimulated his mind.

Before the moon tipped the pines above the rim of the Pass, which was late in the early morning hours, Rock had solved at least the second of his three problems.

Thiry Preston was honestly afraid her brother Ash would kill him or that he would kill Ash. So she wanted to send Rock away. But only so far was she wholly honest.

She feared Rock would discover something wrong there at Sunset Pass. Ash Preston was crooked. No doubt of this! Perhaps the father was, too, and some of the brothers. But Mrs. Preston was ignorant of it; so were Alice, and the younger brothers. Thiry bore this burden alone. That was the secret of her sad eyes and lips. That was the power Ash Preston had over her—love for him and fear. That was why no cowboys ever got a fair chance to win Thiry Preston's friendship.

To go or stay—that was the question! If he left her, she might love him, surely would always remember him regretfully, tenderly. If he stayed she would hate him. But then he might save her.

Rock knew the West. He had become a part of it. The Prestons were new, comparatively, to this wild range. He knew Western men, their slow evolution, their uncanny power to suspect and search out and find among them the cattleman who transgressed the unwritten laws. All cattle-raisers stole from one another. But there was a distinction with a difference.

Gage Preston was getting rich—a little bit swiftly for a rancher on an ordinary scale. How? Rock answered the query in many ways, but only one way seemed tenable. Preston sold cattle on the hoof, the same as other ranchers. None but rustlers ever sold cattle that did not belong to them. And certainly Preston could not be a rustler. It was inconceivable that Ash Preston could be a rustler, either, at least without his father knowing. But Rock scouted the rustler idea.

The Prestons had become butchers of cattle on a considerable scale. Did anyone, outside themselves, know just how many steers they butchered? What a pertinent question here! Rock was certain that he would find out that no outsiders knew how many head of stock they killed. And here was the gist of the matter.

Some of the Prestons, with Ash at the head, and the father either in with them or unable to prevent it, were killing cattle not their own, burning or hiding the skins, and selling the beef at near and distant points.

"Good Lord!" muttered Rock under his breath. "I've hit it plumb center. The damn fools, thinkin' they can hide that long! Gage Preston ought to have more sense. But it's that rattlesnake son who's got this outfit buffaloed. No wonder poor Thiry has sad eyes. Well, by heaven, I'll stay at Sunset Pass!"

Chapter Six

Quicklime

A BELL awakened Rock from late slumbers. The sun was up, and as he peeped out over his blanket covering he saw the grass shine gold under the cedars. He had overslept, which was not a remarkable fact, considering how long it had taken him to get to sleep.

While performing his ablutions his thoughts whirled, and then steadied to the stern consideration of the task before him. In the sober light of day it seemed tremendous. He had to prove his suspicions, which had lost no strength during sleep, and if they were well found-

ed, then he must somehow stop the illicit proceedings before the Prestons were overwhelmed by catastrophe.

Briskly he strode toward the double cabin, conscious of heart-beating anticipation, and when he thumped upon the porch Alice Preston came out of the kitchen, carrying plates and cup, which she set upon the table. She smiled at him. How pretty she was!

"I'm ashamed, Miss Alice," he said as he stepped over the bench. "Think of a cowboy late on his first mornin' of a new job! But I promise it'll not happen again."

Rock made short work of his breakfast, and glad somehow that he had not encountered Thiry, he hurried away down toward the corrals. At the barnyard Rock found Al Preston leading in some horses; and one of his brothers was jacking up a hind wheel of the green wagon.

"Mornin', boss," drawled Al.

The other boy nodded at Rock.

"Are you Tom or Harry?" asked Rock, suddenly reminded of the twins.

"I'm Harry."

"All right, Harry, I'll know you tomorrow or bust. Where's Tom?"

"He left us to grease the wagon and went off after a horse for you."

"For my white horse, Egypt?" asked Rock.

"No—I'm—sorry to say. Ash saddled him and rode off on him."

Rock for the moment succumbed to a silent fury. But seeing the gray-eyed brothers watching him curiously, keen to catch how he would take this first move of Ash's, he thought he had better explode naturally and wholesomely, as might any cowboy. "— — — — —!" he yelled lustily. "He took my new white horse! And my saddle that I wouldn't lend to the King of England! Doggone! Boys, was it supposed to be a joke?"

"Joke nothin'. Ash was just mean, like he always is when we get a new rider. But if you take my advice you'll swallow it—leastways till Ash comes back. If you follow Ash now, mad as you are, there'll only be another fight."

"Take it as a joke. Or better be nice about it," added Harry. "That always stumps Ash. If he can't make you mad he lets up—for a while, anyway."

"Thanks, boys. I'll think it over," rejoined Rock, grateful for their solicitude.

"Let's get to work," suggested Harry. "We're late. And Ash ain't the only one Pa can cuss."

While Rock and Al greased the wagon wheels, Harry hitched up, and by the time this task was done Tom rode in, leading a horse. It was a bay that instantly took Rock's eye, and which would have made up for the loss of 'most any

horse, except one like Egypt.

"Where's Ash's saddle?" he asked.

"It's hangin' there," replied Al. "But, gee! you won't ride his, will you?"

"I'll be darned if I won't," returned Rock, with grim humor. "You boys rustle along. I'll catch up." When Rock rode around the barn he espied the wagon far ahead down the gentle slope. He moved on at a trot, his mind busy. He came to the forks of the road, and taking the left one he entered the cedars, climbed the ridge, and descended to a grassy open meadow, only to mount another cedared ridge. It was not long until the sweet sage-wind suffered a change and became tainted. Rock rode up a sparsely cedared slope to a level bench, and soon came upon the site that had once been Slagle's ranch. The boys were halting before the several cabins. As Rock rode up, the stench unmistakably heralded a slaughter-house. Cabins, corral fences, barns and sheds, and even the trees bore ghastly evidence of the nature of what this old Slagle ranch had sunk to. Skins of cattle hung everywhere.

The horses were turned loose to graze, and Rock, with the three boys, set to work. It was no easy task for one man, or even two men, to fold a stiff hide and compress it into small space. But that was what they had to do. As the day grew warmer the odor increased. Rock did not drive the boys, but he drove himself. He heard Al say to his brothers in an aside, "Sure he's a hawg for work."

Nevertheless, during this labor, and while joking with the brothers, without any ostensible interest in the place or the hides, Rock was bending all his keen faculties toward the end that he had determined upon. Nothing escaped his sharp eye, yet during the half day that it took to complete this job he did not observe anything that struck him significantly. Toward late afternoon, however, he happened to kick a piece of white substance, not stone, and of a color markedly contrasting with the red earth. He smelled it—tasted it. Quicklime! Rock put it in his pocket.

In due time Tom mounted the loaded wagon to drive home, while the other brothers rode off toward the woods, each now with a rifle over his pommel, and Rock was left alone.

He took out the piece of quicklime. It did not appear to be very old. He looked around where he had found it to see if there was more. After diligent search he found a smaller piece. Quicklime in any quantity there, might be used to deaden the stench of decaying offal, blood, and bones. Rock

searched all the cabins, sheds, bins, without finding any more. None had ever been used upon the horrible pile that had accumulated in the hollow below the slaughterhouse.

Manifestly the Prestons left the entrails and skeletons of their cattle there on the ground to rot. No need to waste valuable time destroying what the elements, the dogs, coyotes, and hogs would soon do away with. But they might have left something here that they wanted to destroy quickly. Hides! Cow hides they could not sell because these did not bear their brands!

All of a sudden, into Rock's searching mind there flashed memory of a deep well he had once helped to dig on these premises. Slagle wanted to get water close at hand, to obviate the necessity of packing it uphill from the brook. But they never struck water, and at 80 feet abandoned the effort.

Since that time brush had grown heavily all around the ranch houses, but after some search Rock located the well. The edges had weathered, widening the mouth. He could not get right to the brink at this point. On the opposite side, however, opened a break in the brush. He was about to crash his way through the bushes, around to this opening, when his caution urged him not to leave a trail. Carefully he retraced his steps, worked around into a narrow path, in which he saw boot tracks.

Reaching the well, Rock peered down. He saw only the gravel sides and the black hole. He dropped a stone into it. No sound! He thought that strange. Selecting a larger one he leaned over and let it fall. The hole certainly was deep. A low soft thud, barely distinguishable, came to his taut ears.

"By gum!" he ejaculated. "That well had a rock bottom." Rock cautiously stretched himself on the ground, and putting his head over the brink of the well he sniffed like a tracking hound. He caught a faint scent of something that was not earth or brush and certainly not rotting hides. And it was rotting cattle hides which he expected to smell.

Resting a moment, he tried again. This time he caught the scent strongly enough to recognize it. Quicklime! Rock sat up, suddenly sweating, though he felt a cold chill. He felt no doubt that down this well, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of cattle hides had been dropped—not one of which bore the Preston brand.

Rock crawled on hands and knees back along the edge of the path, making certain not to leave the slightest mark. He found another piece of quicklime, and several smaller pieces. No doubt they had spilled out of a sack. When he

got to the boot tracks he scrutinized them with the photographing eyes of a trailer of long experience. He cut twigs from the under side of a bush, and with minute care measured the length and breadth of the most clearly defined print. These twigs he stored in his pocket.

He retraced his steps back to the open, and saddling the horse the boys had brought up before they left, he mounted, and rode quickly away to get out of the stench.

The daily phenomenon that gave this Pass its name was in full and glorious sweep when Rock reached his cabin. Weary and worried as he was, he had to sit down and watch the beautiful end of day.

There were fewer clouds and these hung round the distant peaks, as if anchored to the steep higher slopes. Strange to see no gold in this sunset! But pearl gray and silver sheen and shell pink filled the great gap of sky. The curtains and shafts of colored light were wanting, too. Yet withal there was exquisite beauty, rarer, more delicate, quickly evanescent and soon gone.

Rock shaved and changed his clothes. He made sure, this evening, to be on hand before the first supper bell rang.

All the younger members of the family came at the call. The children romped from one side and the boys raced from the other.

Alice, who had rung the bell and called gayly, "Come and get it," took her seat beside Rock. "We're livelier when Ash and Pa are away," she said, smiling.

"So I notice. Sure hope they stay away long," he replied, remarking how singularly she spoke of Ash before her father.

Thiry, as before, sat opposite Rock, and when he could summon courage to look straight at her he suffered another twinge at the enhanced sadness of her face.

Nevertheless, Rock had such hold on himself that he amused and interested Mrs. Preston, brought smiles to Alice's face and shouts of glee from the children. But as soon as he had finished supper he excused himself and seeking the gloom of the pines, he gave himself up to turbulent anticipations.

The moon appeared long in rising, and Rock, patrolling a beat under the trees, both longingly and fearfully watched for the silver radiance over the rim. It came at last and found him unprepared. How could he bear to terrorize Thiry Preston by confessing his determination to stay?

At length he could no longer procrastinate. Skirting the edge of the pines, he circled the slope, and coming to the stream he followed that up to a level, and soon found the great pine under which he had

talked with Thiry the night before. The far side of the Pass was blanched in moonlight; this side was dark in shadow. Rock was unable to see the rustic seat until he could almost touch the tree.

To his mingled relief and disappointment Thiry was not there. He sat down to watch and think. A light shone through the curtained window of her cabin.

Trueman could not rally any connected thoughts. He must wait until she came—until he could see and hear her. That moment would liberate him. He had waited at a rendezvous for many a girl—a situation always attended with pleasurable and sometimes perplexing sensations—but this was not the same. How tremendous the issue of this meeting!

He heard the cabin door open. A broad light flared out into the gloom. Then Thiry appeared in the doorway, clearly defined. She wore white. She had changed her dress since supper. Trueman's heart gave a leap and then seemed to stand still while she stood peering out into the night. She closed the door behind her—vanished. But Rock heard quick light footfalls. She was coming.

Presently her pale form grew more distinct. Rock saw her put out her hands, feeling for the tree or the bench. He reached up to take them.

"Oh!" she cried, evidently startled. "It's you, Mr. Rock."

"Yes." He did not let go of her hands.

"You're—late. I—I've been here twice," she said.

"I'm sorry, but it took courage to come at all," returned Rock.

"Didn't it, though? Mr. Rock, you—you are holding my hands. Please let go so I may sit down."

He released her and leaned back against the pine, conscious that her presence had ended his uncertainty. She sat down, quite close to him, and bent her head forward a little, as if trying to pierce the gloom.

Suddenly the moon slipped up over the black rim, and magically the darkness lightened. A silver radiance touched the girl's hair and face.

Rock, his own features in shadow, watched her and waited. The hour seemed to be the most momentous of his life. The night wind, sweet and balmy, was moving up from the Pass, roaring low in the tree-tops. How innumerable the nights he had listened to that music, always with a sense of its potency, of its message! And the time of its fulfillment had come.

"Ash stole your horse?" she began tentatively.

"Reckon I wouldn't say stole. But he sure borrowed Egypt."

"*Egypt!* I knew you named him that."

"Yes. Much obliged to you."

"Who told you?"

"Lucy. I've sure a stand-in with her."

"So it appears. I should be pleased that you called Leslie's horse by the name I gave him. Most everybody knows. Ash certainly knows. And—that's why I can't be pleased or flattered."

"Lucy was, anyhow. She said you loved the horse."

"Oh, I do. I used to ride him, too. How glorious it was! But Ash caught me once—and then, well, I never got on him again."

"Your world revolves around your brother Ash," mused Rock. "Well, some day I'll put you up on Egypt, right here in your yard. And some other day—maybe—I'll give him to you."

"Oh! You couldn't—and I couldn't accept." She was silent a moment, evidently not quite sure how to take him.

"I asked Al what you did when you found out Ash took your horse," went on Thiry, presently.

"What did Al say?"

"He said you were thunderstruck. And you swore something terrible."

"Al told the truth, Thiry," admitted Rock with reluctance. "I never was so surprised—never so furious. New trick on me! My beautiful horse—that *you* had named—taken from me."

"Mr. Rock, you see, then—how impossible Ash is!"

"Nobody or nothin' is impossible."

"Dad says the man doesn't live who can stand Ash's meanness."

"Well, I'm livin' and maybe I can. You saw him this mornin'?"

"Yes. I was up early, helping Ma get breakfast. When the horses came up it wasn't light yet. I heard Dad jawing somebody. Then Range came in and told us. At the table I asked Ash why he'd stolen your horse and—what he meant—to do with him."

Here emotion accompanied Thiry's speech, she grew husky, and faltered. " 'Luce told me he'd called the hoss Egypt, which was your pet name,' said Ash. 'That's why I took him an' why I'm goin' to break a leg for him.' "

Only Rock's powerful hold upon himself, fortified by hours of preparation for anything, kept his anger within bounds. "All because I gave him your pretty name! Tough on the horse—and you were afraid to open your mouth! Much you love Egypt!"

"Wait a minute, will you," she answered, not without anger. "I pitched into Ash Preston as never before in our lives. I—I don't know what all I called him. He took it—and, oh, he looked dreadful. But he never said a word. He got up, nearly overturning the table,

jumped on the horse, and was gone like a white streak."

"I stand corrected," replied Rock thickly. "I talk too quick. I'm sure glad you had the nerve to call him. If you hadn't— Well, Thiry, I suppose you want to know what I'm goin' to do about this horse deal?"

"Worry over that has made me sick all day. I don't want to hear, but I must."

"When Ash gets back, I'll go up to him nice and pleasant. I'll say, 'Look here, cowboy, if you want to borrow my horse, ask me for him.' "

"Suppose he comes back without Egypt?"

"Then I think I'd better pass it off as if nothin' had happened. I'd ask your father. And if Egypt was crippled I'd go find him and end his misery."

Then followed a long silence.

"Mr. Rock, you—you were to tell me something tonight?" she began nervously.

"I have several things to tell you."

"You needn't tell me *one*. I can feel it—you're not going away."

"No," he replied, with a ring in his voice.

"Oh—Mr. Rock, I feared you wouldn't. All day long I've felt it. But, oh, if you only knew! It's not all for Ash's sake that I ask it. But for Dad and Mother, Alice and Lucy—for me!"

"Thiry," said Rock, with deep feeling, "last night I almost gave in to you. It was terribly hard not to. But tonight I have hold of myself. You can't persuade me. You can't drive me. I shall stay. I've thought all night and all day. Out of this torture has come two facts, which I believe as I do my own soul."

"What are they?" she asked.

"I believe I can serve you best by stayin' at Sunset Pass."

"And the other?"

"I love you."

She flung out her hands, protestingly, imploringly, and as if to ward off some incomprehensible peril. "Mr.—Rock!" she gasped. "You dare make love to me—when we've never been together an hour —when I'm insisting you leave my home!"

"I'd dare that, yes, under any circumstances," he retorted, coolly. "But as it happens, I'm not makin' love to you. I'm tellin' you a simple fact. I'm not likely to annoy you with it soon again. But I sort of welcome this chance to prove somethin' to myself. You'll hear gossip about me and my love affairs, which you can believe if you like. But I know now I never had a real one before. It suits me to stake what I think I've become against the old True Rock. This needn't worry you one little bit."

"You speak in riddles," she re-

plied incredulously. "How can I help but worry—now, more than ever?"

"I shall leave you blissfully alone. I shall hardly be even polite if I see you at mealtime. Your brother Ash will soon see that there's one rider who's not mushy over you."

"To what end?" she went on sharply. "Is that to deceive Ash, so you can stay here?"

"Partly. But I'm bound to confess that it's to spare you."

"Oh, you're not going to spare me," she cried. "You'll not leave me alone. And even if you did Ash would believe it only a blind—that you were with me during his absence. It's a poor plan. Please give it up."

"No."

She began to twist her hands in her white gown. The agitation, which before he had marked, was possessing her again. The idea that he had decided to stay at Sunset Pass held some singular dread for her. And while he weighed this in mind he watched her with penetrating gaze, steeling his heart against the tenderness that threatened to overwhelm him.

With evident strong effort she controlled some almost irresistible fear or conflict. Her glance changed to one of deep and unfathomable mystery. She had discovered a latent strength. Rock divined she had been driven to extremity, and he grew sickeningly sure that she was involved somehow with Ash and her father in something which would not bear the light of day.

"Trueman Rock, I want you to leave Sunset Pass," she said, leaning to him.

"So you've told me about a thousand times."

"Let's risk being discovered meeting at Wagontongue," she went on. "You can get work anywhere. We'll take Mr. Winter into our confidence. We can meet in his store and spend an hour or two in his office. Then I'll arrange to stay with Mrs. Winter all night when I come to town. You can meet me there, too. I will go to Wagontongue every week."

"Why would you be willin' to do this unusual thing?" asked Rock, eager to lead her on and on.

"Didn't you say you—you wanted to be friends with me?"

"I sure did."

"It's your only chance. And I'm giving you that to get you—to persuade you to leave here."

"Thiry, I ask you again—*why* do you want me to leave?"

"To keep you and Ash apart."

"Is that the only reason?"

"It's the—the big one," she replied, with both voice and glance unsteady.

"But that won't keep Ash and me apart. He will come to town when you do. He'll watch you."

"I'll choose the time when he is away with Dad. He won't know that I go to town."

"When he's away—where?"

"Why, on the range. Dad has large orders. The driving and—and the—the work will take up half his time from now on."

What a child she was, thought Rock! As transparent as crystal water! But she was withal a woman, with all a woman's power to surprise and waylay to attain her ends. He ruthlessly laid traps for her, but the sole reason was not only to lead her into betrayal. "You would risk so much for me?"

"It's not for you, though I know I—I—*will* like you, if you let me. It's for Ash and Dad—all of us."

"It's very sweet of you, Thiry," he said, with just enough satire to belie the portent of his words, "but very little to risk my life for."

"No, Trueman, it may save your life."

"You call me Trueman?"

"Yes, Trueman. We can deceive Ash. The Winters will do anything for me. Ash will never catch us together."

"How long would you expect this sort of thing to go on? We couldn't keep it up forever, could we? And when it came to an end—and I worshiped you—what then?"

"I'd run the same risk as you."

"What of? Being killed?"

"No! No! No! You're tantalizing me. You know what I mean."

"Indeed I don't. Reckon some locoed cowboys would think you meant that you risked the danger of love."

"I meant just that, Mr. Trueman Rock," she blazed. "I'm human. And surely it is not beyond the bounds of possibility for me to —to love someone. Especially if he sacrificed for me—proved himself a man."

"Thiry Preston, are you offerin' such a hope to me?" he asked huskily.

"It's not a hope, but a chance—only a chance—and all I *can* offer."

"But a chance—that means a lot," he went on, without remorse. "I could be with you alone?"

"Yes, as long as you wished."

"Could I make love to you?"

"How could I keep you—from it?"

"Would you let me kiss you?"

"Yes," she replied, white-faced and calm.

"Would you kiss *me*—now—to seal the compact?" he went on, as mad in the ecstasy of the moment, as stern to convict her.

"You drive a hard bargain," she murmured bitterly. "I've never kissed any man save Ash and Dad—but I will kiss you." She stood up, took brave, but hesitating steps, until her knees pressed against his, and as she bent over, instinctively her hands went out. Rock saw them

trembling. She was going through with it. A moonbeam caught her face. Rock uttered a cry of repentance. One second more would make it too late.

Rock seized her hands, and bending his head, he kissed one and then the other. "Thiry," he whispered, "I would give almost my very life to have you kiss me. But not for this—I led you on. I wanted to see how far you would go. You poor, loving, blinded girl! What would you not sacrifice for this damned Ash Preston? I will stay here. You have no idea what a horrible temptation you gave me. To meet you often—to have you alone—to be able to kiss you! *Thiry!* I could make you love me—but so help me God, I wouldn't have your love at such sacrifice. I'll win it square and fair—or never. Now, I'll go, and I'll not speak to you soon again. Trust me, Thiry. Good night."

He kissed her hands again and rushed away into the moon-streaked shadows.

Chapter Seven

Preston Gives Advice

Four days passed, days full of hard labor for Rock, and pondering thought, and slow absorbing adaptation to the most difficult and strangest situation he had ever encountered. Early at breakfast and late at supper he saw Thiry and then only to exchange a greeting. He did not look to see if she looked at him, though curiosity and longing consumed him.

By doing most of the fence work he made himself more than solid with the three brothers. He let them ride off up into the timber to cut pine saplings and snake them down to the pasture, while he dug the post holes and built the fence. Opportunity would some day come for him to ride down to the old well on Slagle's ranch, and find out what was in it.

On the fifth morning Al remarked, laconically, "We sure gotta hustle today, for Pa will be home."

"Why the particular hustle today, Al?" queried Rock.

"Pa has a way of slippin' up on us, an' it'd sure never do to be ketched loafin'. He wouldn't let us go to the rodeo and dance on the Fourth."

"I'd forgotten about that," rejoined Rock with enthusiasm. "Are all the folks goin'?"

"Pa and Ma ain't goin', but sure the rest of us Prestons are."

"Includin' Ash?" asked Rock casually.

"He never missed one yet that Thiry went to—leastways a dance. Allie and the kids will stop at Leslie's. Thiry said she was goin' to Winter's. Reckon you'll ride in with us?"

"I'll ask your dad," returned

Rock, thoughtfully. It would be very much better, perhaps, for him to remain on the ranch. Yet the urge laid hold of him. He could take just a peep in at the dance to see Thiry in a party dress.

"Reckon, on second thought, I will go," he said to Al.

Late in the afternoon the brothers left off work and rode home. This time Rock went with them. They reached the barns, to ascertain that Ash and the others had not yet come in. Rock, after caring for his horse, slowly sauntered up the slope to his cabin.

While he was cleaning up for supper, he heard the clip-clop of trotting horses, then a rattle of wheels. With a start he went to the door. Scoot Preston was driving up on the seat of a big empty wagon Two more wagons had topped the slope. Soon they halted before the cabins. Rock waited for riders to appear, and he was not disappointed. The burly form of the older Preston hove in sight, riding a roan and leading two saddle-horses. A little afterward, sight of Ash on Egypt shot a quick stab through Rock. The next instant he relaxed. The white horse appeared tired, but none the worse for the absence.

"Aw!" exclaimed Trueman aloud, and his relief told him just how much he had cared. "Reckon I might as well go out and get it over."

But first he went inside. While pondering over how best to meet this situation, he had buckled on his gun belt. Suddenly the fact dawned on him, and he laid hard hands on the belt buckle. But he got no farther. He had no right to face this vicious unknown problem, Ash Preston, without being armed.

Whereupon he strolled out leisurely. As he came in sight of the arriving Prestons, halfway between the cabins, Gage spied him, and with a start he wheeled about from the family, who were welcoming him, to dismount like any cowboy, and hurried to intercept Rock. As he drew near, his deep gray eyes betrayed considerable anxiety. "Wal, Rock, how are you?" was his greeting, accompanied by extended hand. "The boys say you-all got on fine. I'm sure glad."

"Howdy, boss!" returned Rock cordially. "We got the fence job 'most done."

"Ha! You don't say? Wal, I'll be dog-goned. How'd you ever get thet out of them?"

Preston fell in step with Rock, and they approached the double cabin, where on the wide porch were collected the women and children. Ash was the only one of the returning brothers who got down on the ground.

"Cowboy, I shore hope you won't

rile Ash—leastways hyar before the women," said Preston hurriedly.

"Don't worry, boss," returned Rock, with a genial laugh. He had caught a glimpse of Thiry, who kept somewhat in the background.

Egypt was standing, bridle down, halfway between Ash and the porch. One glance told Rock that he was gaunt, dirty, and rough, but apparently as sound as ever. He whinnied at sight of Rock.

"Howdy, boys!" said Rock, nodding to the drivers on the wagons. Then, halting beside Egypt, he turned to face Ash Preston. Despite his iron control a slight quiver strung his frame. How cool, intent, potential of evil menace this man! He stood at ease, hands on his hips, his black sombrero slouched back, his blue-flame eyes piercing Rock, as if to read his mind. Rock had met penetrating glances before, and this one shot little cold sparks along his marrow.

"Howdy, Ash! Did you like my horse?" Not improbably that was the last query Ash Preston would ever have anticipated.

"Best hoss I ever forked," he replied, without feeling of any kind.

"Thanks. Hope you were good to him."

"Wal, Rock, the fact is I begun bad," drawled Ash. "But he piled me in the brush. An' runnin' him over rough ground didn't faze him none. An' I reckon I ended treatin' him good."

"Did he pitch with you?" queried Rock, in genuine surprise.

"He's got any outlaw beat I ever rode."

"Dog-gone! Leslie swore this horse never pitched in his life."

"Reckon thet was no lie, Rock. But I nagged him. He threw me, an' I couldn't get near him again thet day."

"Served you right," responded Rock naturally. "It doesn't pay to be mean to horses. And see here, Ash, don't go borrowin' a horse from a rider without askin' him."

The tension relaxed, the charged atmosphere lost its fullness and suspense. Ash, though he betrayed little of what might have been his true state, eyed Rock with slow, cool smile, and slouched with clinking steps to the porch.

Thiry met him, reached for him in glad excitement: "Oh, Ash, I'm glad you're back—and you—and everything's all right."

Ash wrapped his long arms around her, and hugging her closely, he bent his head over her. The action seemed eloquent, beautiful, and yet it pierced Rock like fire. Bending down to feel the legs of his horse, he kept that posture until he had recovered. Without a glance backward, then, he led Egypt down toward the barns.

Rock spent so much time caring for Egypt, cleaning and brushing

him, and making him a comfortable bed of grass in a stall, that it was dark when he got back to his cabin. The supper bell rang. He hurried out, and fortunately did not arrive late, as the Prestons were just seating themselves at table.

For the first time in five days Rock looked deliberately into Thiry's face. She gave him a grateful smile, wistful and wondering, as if she would make amends for doubt. It softened Rock, and though he did not glance at her again, he managed to get through the meal cheerfully.

Afterward, to his relief, Preston called him into his cabin. "Have a drink with me, Rock," invited Preston.

"Sorry, boss, but I've quit."

"Have a cigar, then. I shore recommend these."

"Thanks," replied Rock. "Did you have a successful trip?"

"Best ever, but thet won't interest you," returned Preston briefly. "I'll say, though, thet when the trip ended hyar I was some worried. An' when I seen you packin' a gun, I was scared stiff."

"Sorry, boss, but that oughtn't have bothered you. It's just habit."

"Ahuh!" returned Preston, giving Rock a dubious look. "But it was hard to figger you. Ash shore wasn't able to. An' you clean knocked the pins from under him. He didn't, an' neither did any of us, expect you to take thet dirty deal so nice an' friendly."

"What else could I do?" demanded Rock, spreading wide his hands. "I came out here to make friends, not enemies."

"Wal, I'm shore thankin' you. You've got Ash stumped. I heard him ask Lucy if you'd been runnin' after Thiry."

"Humph! What did Lucy say?"

"Lucy said you hadn't—thet you were seldom hyar, an' then never paid no attention to Thiry. Is thet so, Rock?"

"Reckon it is, since you left."

"You an' Thiry quarreled, I take it," went on Preston. "She didn't say so, but she has a way of makin' the boys leave her alone. I didn't think you'd be so easy, an' I'll gamble it won't last. Just before supper Thiry told me you'd acted wonderful with Ash—thet she'd misjudged you. Don't remember when I've seen the lass so strange. The truth is, Rock, I think she likes you. You've shore begun right, if you're in earnest about her."

Rock could scarcely believe his ears. Yet there was no mistaking Preston. He implied even more than he said.

"In earnest? Good Lord! I wish I knew how to tell you how earnest I am."

"Wal, I reckon now I savvy why you met Ash that way. Rock, you're

an upstandin' fine chap an' I like you. So don't be backward tellin' me just how you feel about Thiry."

"Preston, the minute I laid eyes on Thiry I fell in love with her. It's changed my whole life. I used to be a free, careless hombre, runnin' after girls, ridin' here and there, drinkin', gamblin', fightin'. But that's past."

"Thanks fer talkin' out," rejoined Preston, bending deep, inscrutable eyes upon Rock. "Course you mean marriage, cowboy?"

Rock jerked in his chair; his face reddened. "Preston—I never let myself have—such hope," he burst out.

"Faint heart never won fair lady," quoted the rancher. "Declare yourself, like a man, if you want my interest."

"Boss—I—I don't quite savvy," replied Rock uncertainly. "What more can I say? Lord, I never dared even dream of Thiry as my wife."

"But you'd like to marry her?" queried this astounding ranchman.

Rock stared a moment. "I'd be the happiest and luckiest fellow on earth."

"Wal, thet's talkin'," returned Preston gruffly. "Do you want my advice?"

"Preston, I—I'd be most grateful for anythin'."

"Thiry ought to be told."

"Aw, no! So soon? Before I've proved what— It'd only distress her—do my cause harm."

"Cowboy, you don't know women," said Preston. "The very fact thet you came to me an' declared yourself, straight like your name, will go far with Thiry, an' all of us 'ceptin' Ash. An' even Ash couldn't help but see thet was right. He beat a cowboy once who dallied after Thiry without talkin' marriage."

"Like as not he'd try to beat me—if I did tell her."

"Wal, I'm appreciatin' your fine feelin's, Rock, so I'll tell her myself," replied the rancher, and turning to the open door he called, "Thiry!"

"Preston!" gasped Rock, rising. Standing as if paralyzed, he heard light, quick footfalls. Immediately the dark doorway framed a slender form in white, with wistful, expectant face and great, doubtful eyes.

"Come in, lass, an' shut the door," said her father.

She complied, and came forward hesitatingly, her glance going from her father to Rock.

"Thiry, come hyar," he went on, and when she drew close he put an arm around her. "Do you see thet big cowpuncher standin' over there?"

"Yes, Dad—I couldn't very well help it," she replied, and she just escaped being demure.

"Sort of pale round the gills, ain't he?"

"Dad, I—I'm afraid he looks a—a little guilty."

"Wal, it's not exactly guilt," laughed Preston. "Lass, Rock has asked your hand in marriage—an' I've given it."

"Dad!" she whispered, and leaned against him as if suddenly bereft of strength. Then she rallied, while the scarlet waved up from neck to cheek. "Are you crazy—or am I? You couldn't joke—" Her blazing eyes flashed in doubt and fear from her father to Rock.

"Miss Thiry," replied Rock, finding himself under those wonderful eyes, "this is the most solemn—and terrible moment of my life."

Slowly she released herself from her father's arm, with widening, darkening eyes, that seemed fascinated by Rock.

"Reckon it's sudden, lass," spoke up Preston. "But thet's this cowboy's way. An' True Rock comes straight to *me*. I like thet. Your ma will, too, when I tell her."

"What do you think—*Ash* will say?" she broke out.

"Ash? Wal, child, he's not your dad or your boss. You're no kid any more. You're a woman, free to do as you want. You shore don't have to ask anythin' of Ash."

"Father!" cried Thiry incredulously, almost with horror.

In that exclamation of protest, of unbelief, of consternation, Rock delved further into this Preston mystery. It seemed to betray Preston's guilt along with that of his son, and Thiry's knowledge of it.

"Wal, lass, will you answer Rock now or do you want some time to think it over?" asked Preston, coolly, unabashed or unconcerned by her agitation. He was deep. He was playing a game that Rock sensed but could not fathom. His effect upon Thiry was also beyond Rock's ken.

"Mr. Rock, I thank you," said Thiry, through trembling pale lips, "for the honor you do me. I'm sorry I cannot accept."

Rock bowed, with what little dignity he could assume.

"Thiry, wait a minute," said her father, as she made for the door. He caught her and held her, unmistakable affection in his grasp. "I'm sorry to upset you. But these things will happen. Don't think your dad wants to get rid of you. I'm powerful fond of you, Thiry. It's only thet lately—wal, I don't want to worry you about what might happen to me. I might not always be hyar to take care of you. I'd like to have your future settled before—before long. An' Rock struck me about right. Aw, there you're cryin'. Wal, run along. I shore can't stand a cryin' woman, not even you. An' it's no great compliment to Rock."

Thiry held her head high as she walked by Rock without giving him another word or glance, and he saw that she was weeping.

"Preston, I ought to knock the daylights out of you," declared Rock wrathfully, when Thiry was gone. "If I ever had any hope to win Thiry, it's sure gone now."

"Much you know about women," said Preston. "I had a hunch Thiry took a shine to you; now I know it."

"Man, you're drunk or crazy, as Thiry said."

"Wal, Rock, if she hasn't before she will now," replied Preston imperturbably. "She knows now you want to *marry* her. Thet always fetches a woman, provided she ain't in love with someone else. Have another cigar, cowboy. I see you've mashed thet one."

Rock discovered that not only had he crushed the cigar, but he had burned his fingers. "Preston, I can't be mad at you, but I sure want to be," returned Rock, resigning himself.

"Set down," said the rancher. "You'll shore be goin' in to town with the rest of the outfit. They're leavin' day after tomorrow. Thet reminds me. I run into thet pretty Mrs. Dabb, an' she said to tell you to be shore an' come to her dance. She's havin' the new town hall decorated."

"Well, in that case I might go," replied Trueman thoughtfully.

"Say, cowboy, wasn't this Dabb woman an old flame of yours?"

"Well, she wasn't exactly mine, but that wasn't my fault."

"Ho! Ho! I know the lady. Thet is to say I've seen her with the cowpunchers. Reckon John Dabb was a damned old fool, marryin' thet young lady. Wal, Rock, if she happened to be a little sweet on you yet it'd shore be lucky fer you. It won't hurt your cause none to let my lass see other women like you."

"Boss, you must have been a devil among the women, in your day," said Rock slyly. "How would you handle this particular case of mine, regardin' the dance?"

"Wal, as you're a handsome cuss, you want to make the most of your chance. It's to be a masquerade, you know."

"Masquerade? I sure didn't know."

"You get yourself up in some dandy outfit. Then first off be cold to Thiry an' sweeter'n pie to your old girl. But you want to be slick, cowboy. Don't carry it too far. Don't overdo it."

Rock laughed. The absurdity of the thing so blandly suggested by Preston did not quite submerge a certain enticement. The nerve of it, the very audacity, the reckless assumption that he might make this wonderful girl jealous, took on him a hold hard to shake.

"Old-timer, I'm afraid I couldn't do it," replied Rock with a grimace, as he flung his second cigar into the fireplace. "It'd be funny; it'd be great, if I dared. But I think I'll

rustle now, before you get me locoed. Good night."

As he opened the door abruptly, he almost bumped into Ash Preston. Rock could not help wondering if Ash had been eavesdropping.

Trueman strolled in the black shadows of the pines near his cabin. The night was pleasant, the wind at its old task in the tree-tops, the frogs along the creek were croaking drowsily of midsummer. The dark Pass, obscure and dreaming, seemed pregnant with life.

The plot had thickened, and Rock saw no way of extricating himself, even had he so desired. In some unaccountable way he had won Gage Preston's regard and friendship. Nevertheless, he concluded that Preston had some deep motive besides a longing to see Thiry safely settled for life. What could that motive be?

Rock tried to give it up and went to bed, where he listened to the sing-song of pines overhead. One by one Rock's thoughts brought him back to the conviction that Preston was deeply involved in crooked work and Thiry knew it.

He awakened at dawn with an idea which must have generated in his subconscious mind while asleep. It was that he should start toward Wagontongue ahead of the Prestons instead of waiting until they had gone. He wanted to stop long enough with Slagle to dig through the husk of that rancher's provocative reticence. Likewise, he wanted to ride over that part of the range which had been the scene of Preston's latest labors. With Preston at home, busy with manifold tasks left him, and his family on the road, there would be opportunity for Rock to confirm or disprove his suspicions.

At breakfast Rock asked permission to leave that day, instead of on the morrow, and it was readily given. Saddling Egypt, and leading the rested and mettlesome horse up to the cabin, Rock tied a couple of blankets behind the cantle, and rode away under the pines, without being noticed, so far as he could tell, by any of the family.

What he devoutly hoped was that Preston had not worked close to the Pass. The Flats, Rock had ascertained, were the wide gray cedar-dotted levels some miles this side of Slagle's ranch. Tom Preston had been given orders to drive the green wagon as far as the Flats. Trotting briskly along, his eyes ever and anon keen on the broad wheel tracks, Rock soon arrived at the bottom of the slope, where the ground spread wide and flat for miles.

He found where the wagon had left the road to halt in the first clump of cedars, and then had gone on again, back to the road. A mile or more this side of Slagle's ranch,

which was hidden in the rough hilly country west of the Flats, the wagon tracks and hoof tracks of saddle-horses turned off the road. Rock did not care to follow them until the Prestons had passed, and even then he would be extremely careful how he did follow. Ash Preston might have eyes as good as his own.

To Rock's disappointment, he found that Slagle was not at home, and he could do nothing else but ride on, thinking that he might stop at Pringle's.

A couple of miles down the road Rock met the wagon tracks again, coming from across the Flats.

"By golly! looks like a short-cut, doesn't it? I guess not!" exclaimed Rock derisively. Then he discovered that these tracks were fresh, and made on the return home. The wagons had been empty. This was longer and harder going than 'round the road. Rock passed on a few hundred yards, to find where the Prestons had driven into the road on their outward trip. And still farther on he came to more tracks, older by some weeks.

Chapter Eight

Fresh Hides

After pondering awhile, Rock decided he might safely risk some careful scouting around, provided he left no traces and kept keen survey of the several miles of road. With this in mind he tied Egypt on hard ground, and taking to the thickest part of the cedars he mounted the hill, then went on to the summit of the ridge.

The wind was strong in his face. It carried more than heat, and as he gained his objective point, he both smelled and saw dust in the air. Then something faint, but raw—an odor that was tainted!

Eagerly Rock came up behind a cedar, and from this cover he peered out and down. The slope on that side sheered steep and rough, down to an open draw, up which his keen sight roved. This draw appeared pale green, with a dry winding wash in the center. It led up to a wide pocket, where yellow water gleamed. Cows were bawling. White objects flashed in the sunlight, drawing Rock's gaze the quicker. Then he discerned a cabin and corral, covered with white spots, also men on horses and on foot.

Rock slipped to his knees, and crawling to a low thick cedar bush he half buried himself in it, and peered out. The white objects were cowhides, thrown over the corral fence, and nailed on the cabin, hair side down. There were seven riders, several still sitting their saddles, the others walking around.

One of the cowboys, a tall fellow wearing a red scarf, turned some of

the cowhides over to look at the under side. Presently he and the others on foot collected in a group round their mounted comrades, and talked. Watching like a hawk, Rock convinced himself that these riders were curious about Preston's butchering business, though nothing inimical to the Prestons manifested itself.

Rock strained his eyes to take in all details of that red-scarfed rider's appearance, so he might recognize him some day. But the distance was pretty far, even for his sharp eyes, and he could not be sure. Presently the mounted riders galloped off, and those on foot took to their horses and followed. They rode up the ridge, westward from the cabin. The fellow with the red scarf, following last, halted on the brink of that pocket and took final survey of the scene. Then he followed after his comrades, who had disappeared over the ridge.

"Dog-gone!" muttered Rock, rolling out of his uncomfortable covert and wiping his perspiring face. "What to make of that? Maybe means nothin' an' then again—"

He counted the cowhides in sight. Thirteen! It was not a lucky number. But there might be several more hides on the far side of the log cabin. Even so, that was rather a small number, if the hides in sight represented all the beeves killed by Preston on this occasion. Preston had gone to town with three large wagons, one of which Rock had helped load with hides. The other two, of course, had been loaded with beeves. How many? That was something Rock wanted to know—and meant to find out. He retraced his way to his horse, racking his brain the while.

No doubt at all was there that the cowhides in plain sight over in the draw bore one of several of Preston's brands. If other stock besides Preston's had been butchered, which Rock did not doubt in the least, the hides with their telltale brands had of course been well hidden. Heads were easier to dispose of, and the risk of discovery through them was negligible.

Straddling Egypt once more, Rock rode down the hill toward Wagontongue. Cedars and brush grew densely at the foot of this slope, where the road crossed a culvert over a deep wash. Rock's eyes, bent on the ground, suddenly spied the heel imprint of a rider's boot. It stopped Rock. If he ever had occasion to study a track of any kind it became photographed on his mind. He had seen that heel track before. Slipping out of the saddle, Rock bent to scrutinize it. And he experienced a queer little cold chill.

The impression of the heel was well defined, but the toe part was dim. It pointed off the road. Rock found another, like it, though not

so plain. But for his trained eyes the trail might as well have been made in snow. Whoever had made it, though, had stepped lightly. It led into the coarse white grass, down over the bank, to the edge of the culvert, where it vanished.

There was no doubt in Rock's mind that this imprint was identical with the one near Slagle's well. He had the little sticks with which he had measured that track. Taking them out, Rock was about to go back and measure, when his instinct prompted him to take a look at the culvert, now that he was down there. He walked on, stepping on stones.

The culvert was not the handiwork of masons. The aperture was large, to take care of a considerable flow of water during the wet season. Crude walls of heavy stone had been laid about ten feet high and the same distance apart. Logs and brush had been placed across the top. Above this a heavy layer of earth formed the road.

When Rock stepped into the mouth of the culvert he saw a lumpy floor, which at first glance he thought consisted of rocks lying on dried mud. A foot track, the one he was trailing, brought a low exclamation from his lips. Bending quickly with his little sticks he tried them. They fitted perfectly. Moreover, this one had been made recently.

When Rock rose from that track he knew what he was going to find. The tunnel appeared about a hundred feet long, with light shining in at both ends, and the middle dark. The numerous stones on the floor were of uniform size and shape, and he noted that the first of these lay back several yards from the opening of the culvert.

Rock kicked one. It was soft. Bending to feel of it and to look at it more closely, he ascertained that it was a burlap sack tied 'round something. He laughed sardonically.

"Cowhide," he said, and went on, kicking to right and left. These stone-like objects were all hides tied up in burlap sacks. They were old. Some of them were rotting. Then toward the middle of the culvert, where the bags were thickest, he found that those in sight were lying on a bed of bags, flat, decomposed. Altogether, hundreds, perhaps thousands of hides had been destroyed there.

Rock went back to the point where he had found the boot track. If fresh cowhides had lately been deposited in this hiding-place where were they? Rock searched the ground more carefully. Back from the opening it was difficult to see well. Nevertheless, he trailed the heel track a third of the length of the culvert, toward its center.

Naturally then he reached up to feel where he could not see. He had

to put his toes in crevices between the stones to climb up and reach over the top of the wall. The thick logs placed across from wall to wall, and far apart, left considerable room along the top.

When Rock's groping hand came in contact with a sack he felt no surprise. This one was not soft. It appeared to hold heat. Grasping it firmly, Rock dropped to the ground and hurried with it to the light. He ripped it open. Quicklime, hot and moist! A fresh cowhide, wrapped with hair inside!

With hands that actually shook, Rock unfolded the hide. No slight thing was this proof of somebody's guilt—about to be disclosed! The brand was clear—a half moon. Rock had never heard of it. He certainly knew all the old brands of that range.

He rolled up the hide, stuffed it in the sack, with the little quicklime he had spilled, and put it back where he had found it. Then he struck a match. By the dim light he saw rows of burlap sacks, neatly stowed away.

Rock sneaked out of that culvert and into the cedars and 'round and up to his horse as if indeed he were the guilty one himself. Not until he was riding away down the road, positive that he had been unseen, did he recover his equanimity.

That boot track had been made by Ash Preston. Rock knew it. Gage Preston was growing rich by butchering other ranchers' cattle. The very least implication Rock accorded to Thiry Preston was that she shared the secret, and therefore indirectly the guilt.

And Rock loved her—loved her terribly now, in view of her extremity. When he got to that confession he seemed unable to escape from the tumult and terror it roused in his mind.

Egypt, left to choose his gait, had started off on his fast trot. He had many gaits, but this was his favorite, and it covered distance rapidly. He held to it steadily, except on the hills, when he slowed to a walk.

Rock scarcely saw the beautiful rangeland. He rode past Pringle's place before noon, scarcely aware of it. He was in no mood for friends. But in due time his emotion spent itself upon the resolve to save Thiry if he had to die to do it.

After that he gradually rounded to a coherent, if not a logically connected, sequence of thoughts. When cattle disappeared off the range, any range, in more than a negligible number, it always led, sooner or later, to speculation and private suspicion by every outfit, and usually investigation, also private, by the outfit that had suffered most. Rock recalled cases where quite extensive rustling had never been cleared up. Ranchers worked slowly in this regard. They might step on some-

one's toes. Generally when the perpetrators of crooked work were unearthed, it was accomplished by the cowboys rather than the ranchers.

Rock had no idea how far this extraordinary dealing of the Prestons had gone. It would take considerable time to find that out, if it were possible at all. But it had proceeded far enough to be extremely hazardous for them, and in fact for any riders connected with them. The situation would certainly become a delicate one for Rock, unless he betrayed Preston at once. This was unthinkable. Rock knew his own reputation had always been above reproach, as far as honesty was concerned. It would still hold good with the old cattlemen who knew him. But that could scarcely apply to new ranchers, new outfits, who had come into the Wagontongue range of late years.

Rock believed that before another year was out, if the Prestons kept up this amazing and foolhardy stealing, they would be found out. Why could not Preston see this? He certainly did not lack intelligence. One remark he had made to Thiry had been thought-provoking. It might well be true that Ash Preston, having led or forced his father into criminal practice, dominated him wholly. Ash Preston struck Rock as a man without fear or conscience, and even without a heart, except where Thiry was concerned.

As the hours passed, Rock reviewed the whole knotty question again, without further enlightenment. He strove to bring reason and intelligence to bear, instead of a mounting antipathy for Ash Preston.

It was long past dark when Rock arrived at Wagontongue. Upon inquiring of a Mexican, he found a stable where Egypt would be well looked after. Next he hunted up a restaurant to appease his own hunger, and then he went to the hotel and to bed. The long ride and the long hours of emotional and mental conflict had exhausted him. Not for years had he been so sunk in gloom. The urge to drink came upon him, and he laughed it away. He had need of stimulant, yes, but not that false kind. It was well that he fell asleep at once.

The sawmill whistle disrupted his deep slumber at six o'clock, but he enjoyed the luxury of the soft bed and linen sheets awhile before rising. Rested and fresh again, and with the bright gold sunrise shining in his window, Rock felt far removed from the brooding, fagged rider of the night before. He would find a way. He dared to pit himself against Ash Preston in anything.

After breakfast he went 'round to see Sol Winter. And meanwhile he had subdued himself to some

semblance of the old order of cool insouciance, which state really had been natural before the fair face of Thiry Preston had disturbed his equilibrium forever.

Winter was sweeping out the store, his back to the door, and he did not see or hear Rock.

"Hands up!" said Rock, in harsh disguised voice, as he gave Winter a hard dig in the back with his forefinger, to imitate the prod of a gun.

"O Lord!" ejaculated Winter, swiftly dropping the broom and elevating his hands high. He had once been held up by a robber.

"Turn around," ordered Rock.

Stiff as a poker the storekeeper obeyed, white and tight of face. "Rock! You—dod-blasted—son of a sea-cook!" he gasped out. "Scared me—most to death!—Same old cowboy! My, you look good! All browned up. Dog-gone. I'm glad to see you!"

"Same here, old-timer," replied Rock heartily. "Reckon you look a little brighter, Sol."

"I've less worry, son, an' at my age worry tells. Fact is, I'm doin' fine again. Since payin' my debts, I've laid in more stock an' advertised it. We're goin' to make money, pardner."

"Fine. I'm sure tickled. Reckon I'll need a pile one of these days. Any news, Sol?"

"Not much. Everybody comin' in for the Fourth. Amy Dabb's givin' the biggest dance ever held in these parts. How're things generally out Sunset Pass way?"

"Pretty bad, Sol. But there's too much of it to tell now."

"Bet you had a run-in with Ash!"

"Nope. Outside of stealin' my horse, Ash acted tolerable nice, for *him*."

"Stole your horse!—an' he's alive yet?" ejaculated Winter, his shrewd old eyes warm upon Rock.

"Sol, I took it as if I was complimented. Honest, I'm tellin' you truth. Now what do you say?"

"Wal, all I can say is love works wonders."

"Does it? All right, old-timer. Let's hope it lasts. But to leave off and talk serious, Sol. I want to find out somethin'."

"What?" asked Winter, as Rock led him back into the store.

"Preston drove in here a couple of days ago," went on Rock, lowering his voice. "In the outfit were three wagons I know of. One was full of hides, which I helped pack. The other two were loaded with meat. Beeves! Now I want to find out how many beeves there were and where they went. But I don't want this information unless we can get it absolutely without rousin' the slightest curiosity or question. Savvy old pardner?"

"Wal, I'll be darned if that ain't funny, for I shore can tell you right now what you're so keen about

knowin'."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Rock, with a quick breath, and he sat down heavily upon the counter. He had actually to nerve himself for the disclosure.

"Heard it quite by accident," went on Winter. "Jackson, who runs Dabb's butcher shop, once worked for me. An' if I do say it myself he liked workin' for me better than for Dabb. Wal, I went in last night to buy some beefsteak to take home. An' I seen a lot of fresh meat hangin' up. Shore I always was curious, but I never let on I was. All I said was: 'See you're stocked up plenty an' fresh. How're you ever goin' to sell all that meat before it spoils?'

" 'It won't last over the Fourth,' he said. 'Long as I got plenty an' can sell cheap to the Mexicans an' lumbermen, it shore goes fast. Wagontongue will soon stand another butcher shop, Sol, an' any time you want to talk business with me I'm ready.'

" 'I'll think it over, Jackson,' I said. 'But where'll we get the meat? Reckon we couldn't cut in on Dabb's supply?'

" 'No, we can't,' he told me, 'but Preston is killin' now altogether instead of sellin' any more on the hoof. He's gettin' thirty dollars more by killin', on each head of stock. He'll sell to anybody. Today he shipped thirty-six beeves. Driscoll told me. Shipped them to Marigold.' "

Winter paused to see what effect this news might have upon Rock.

"Thirty-six!" muttered Rock, with unreadable face and voice.

"Yep. An' I counted ten beeves hangin' up on Jackson's hooks. All fresh. So that makes forty-six. What you want to know all this for?"

"Gee, Sol, you're a gabby old lady!" returned Rock. "I was just askin', because you and I might go into the meat business. And say, who runs the Half Moon brand?"

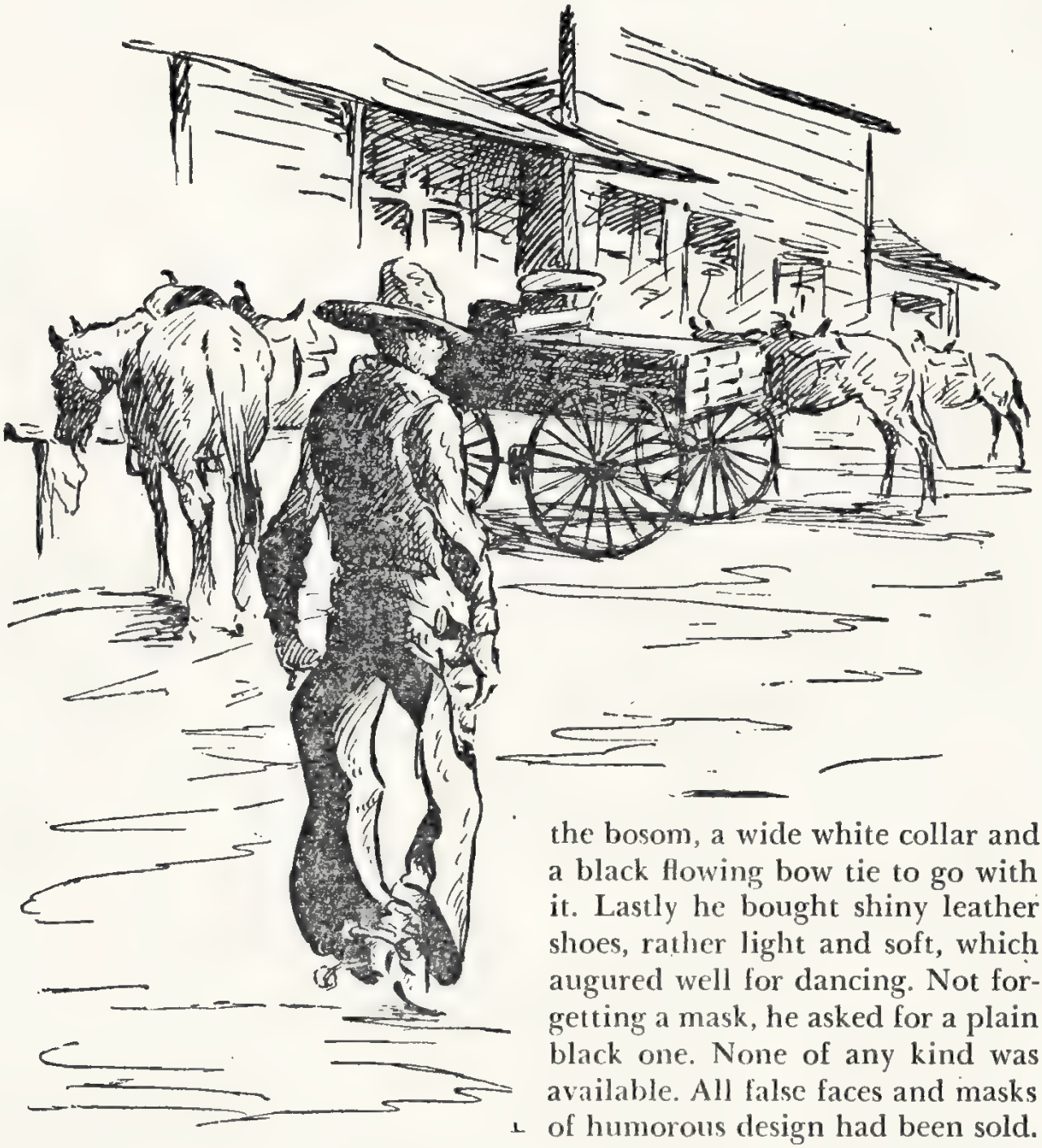
"New cattleman named Hesbitt," replied Winter. "He's been on the range over two years. I've seen him, but don't know him. They say he hails from Wyomin', has got lots of money, an' runs a hard outfit. Clink Peeples is foreman. You ought to know him, Rock."

"Clink Peeples. By gum! that sounds familiar. I've heard his name, anyway. What does he look like, Sol?"

"Onusual tall puncher. Sandy-complected. Eyes sharp like a hawk's, but tawny. Light tawny. Somethin' of a dandy, leastways in town. Always wears a red scarf. An' he's one of the gun-packin' fraternity. Clink will be in town shore over the Fourth."

"Red scarf? Ahum!" said Rock. "Well, Sol, I'll run along, and drop in again."

Reaching Dabb's new store,



Rock went in and hunted up the suit department. It chanced that there was in stock a black broadcloth suit, with frock coat, which might have been made for him, so well did it fit. Rock purchased it and an embroidered vest of fancy design, a white shirt with ruffles in the bosom, a wide white collar and a black flowing bow tie to go with it. Lastly he bought shiny leather shoes, rather light and soft, which augured well for dancing. Not forgetting a mask, he asked for a plain black one. None of any kind was available. All false faces and masks of humorous design had been sold.

Rock carried his possessions back to the hotel, certain that some of his youthful cowboy sensations were not wholly dead. While in his room he cut a pattern of a mask out of paper, and taking this back to the store he bought a piece of black cloth and fashioned it after

the pattern he had cut.

After supper the hotel man, Clark, got hold of him and in a genial way whose intent was obvious to Rock, tried to pump him about the Prestons. Rock had met that same attitude before during the day, and without apparent evasion he did not commit himself. Then who but Jess Slagle stamped into the hotel lobby, in his rough range garb.

Slagle had been trifling with the bottle, but he was not by any means drunk. He was, however, under the influence of rum, and his happened to be a disposition adversely affected by it. "Howdy, thar, Sunset Pass puncher!" he said, loud and leering.

"Hello, Jess! How are you? I called on the way in."

"Left home yesterday. Stayin' till after the fireworks. Are you goin' back to Preston?"

"Why, certainly! Like my new job fine," responded Rock. "I'm sort of a foreman over the younger Prestons."

"Rock, it was a hell of a good bet that Gage Preston would never put *you* to butcherin'. Want a drink with me?"

"No, thanks. I've sworn off," replied Rock shortly, and he went out to walk in the darkness. Slagle's remarks did not set lightly upon Rock. They were trenchant with meaning. Slagle, of course, hated Preston, and naturally would be prone to cast slurs. But would he make two-sided remarks like that, just out of rancor? It would go severely with him if one of them ever came to Preston's ears. And rattlesnake Ash Preston would strike at less than that.

Rock strolled to and fro between the hotel lights and those on the corner.

As he came into the yellow flare of light, a hand, small, eager, and strong, seized his arm, and a feminine voice he knew rang under his ear. "True Rock, I've been on your trail all afternoon."

Chapter Nine

John Dabb's Wife

Rock stared down into the piquant flushed face of his old sweetheart, Amy Wund.

"Now I've got you and I'm going to hang on to you," she said, with a roguishness that did not altogether conceal a firm determination.

"Why—how do—Mrs. Dabb? You sure—"

"Oh, Mrs. Dabb, hell," she interrupted, flashing dark passionate eyes up at him. "Call me Amy, can't you? What's the sense of being so formal? You used to call me 'darling Amy.' "

There was no gainsaying that. "Well, good evenin', Amy," he

drawled. "I've forgotten what I used to call you. Reckon it's not just good taste for you to remind me."

"Perhaps not, True. But you make me furious. Let's get out of the light. I've got to talk to you." Pressing his arm tight she hurried him down the dark street.

"Amy, listen to sense. Oughtn't you be home?" asked Rock gravely.

"Sense from True Rock? Ye gods! When I was sixteen you *made* me meet you out, at night, because my father wouldn't let you come to our house," she retorted.

"That's so, Amy. I guess I was no good. But I've learned a little in all these years—at least enough to consider a woman's name."

"Thank you. I believe you have. And it's not true you were no good. Now about my being at home. I suppose I ought to be there, since I took the responsibility of it. But it's an empty home, Trueman. I am alone most of the time. John has men come there to drink and play cards and talk business. He objects to my friends. He is as jealous as the devil. Just a selfish rich old man!"

"Aw, too bad, Amy," replied Rock, deeply touched. "You never should have married Dabb."

"Father was in debt to John and I had to foot that bill, True," she returned bitterly. "But I didn't waylay you to talk about myself. Did you get the invitation to my dance?"

"I did. Many thanks, Amy. It was good of you. I rather expected to be left out."

"Are you coming, True?"

"Well, now, that's a horse of another color," he said. "I'd sure like to. I might drop in for a little—to look on."

"True Rock! You look on at a dance! Why, cowboy, are you growing old?"

"No, Amy, I feel far from being old. But there are reasons. You should know one of them, anyhow."

"You mean my husband?"

"Sure do. He never had any use for me after I quit him."

"All the same, Trueman, I'd like you to come for several reasons."

"All right, fire away," he said, lightly.

"First for old times' sake. Then because certain of my friends say you won't come. Next because—well, True, I've been a darned fool. I've gone—a—a little too far with a certain cowboy. And I'm afraid of him. He's coming to my dance. And I thought—if you were there—I'd not be afraid, anyhow."

"Who is he, Amy?"

"I don't know his real first name. His last is Peeples. Clink, they call him."

"Clink Peeples. I've sure heard of him. Rides for this new rancher,

Hesbitt."

"Yes. And Hesbitt—"

"One thing at a time, Amy. Is this the last reason you have for wanting me at that dance?"

"No, Trueman, there's another. A woman's reason, and therefore the most important."

"What is it?"

"I won't tell you."

"Very well, I reckon your third reason is enough to fetch me. I'll come."

"Oh, thank you, Trueman," she replied in delight, squeezing his hand. "You always were the dearest, kindest fellow when anyone was in trouble. Trueman, you could steady me. God knows I need it."

"Amy, I don't exactly trust you," said Rock, dubiously. "I never did. But that doesn't mean I haven't faith in you at all. Could I help you—as a friend or brother? Be honest, Amy, I'd despise you if you lied."

"Yes, you could, and I'll be grateful for that—if I can't have more," she rejoined, won to sincerity by his force.

"All right. Shake hands on it," he said.

"But, True, I won't promise not to try to—to make you be more."

"Don't talk nonsense," he returned sharply. "Amy, will you consent to my callin' on your husband?"

"You want to see John?" she queried, astounded, her eyes opening wide. "What on earth for? All right, go ahead. You have my consent. Tell him anything you want, except I was once in love with you—and that it's not utterly impossible for me to be so foolish again."

"I'll take good care you don't do that," he laughed.

"Trueman, I have something more to say," she said, hesitatingly, lacking her former confidence and spirit. "I think you'd better quit riding for the Prestons."

"Why?" he inquired, freezing a little.

"I'm afraid I can't explain what may be only my intuition. But I give you my word of honor, Trueman, that it's not because I—I might be jealous of Thiry Preston."

"No? What is it, then?"

"I believe the Prestons are going to get more than the ill will of the range."

"That's a strong statement, Amy. On what do you base it?"

"True, I can't trace it down. But it must come from many little bits of gossip I've heard. Some of it, by the way, from Peeples. Everyone knows, of course, that you took the job to be near Thiry Preston. It's a joke already. That's your side of it. Trueman, you have a reputation. Oh, I don't mean as a gun-slinger. That's old. Nor do I mean as a great rider, roper, and all

such cowboy qualities. It's that you're true blue, honest, a man of your word. I could tell you a lot of things, if I could remember. One is—Clink Peeples said he reckoned Gage Preston would profit by your honest name. Isn't that a queer remark, Trueman?"

"It is—a little," Rock admitted.

"And here's another—more of a stumper," went on Amy. "Last night John had some men out to the house, as usual. They talked and smoked. When I heard your name I listened. Someone, I think it was Mr. Hesbitt, answered whoever had used your name first. 'I don't know this great cowboy Rock,' he said. 'But if he stays on ridin' for Preston, I'll not share the opinion you men have of him.' Trueman, there's something wrong about this Preston outfit. There's an undercurrent of feeling here and there against them. It'll spread, if there's any reason for it. And then you'd be dragged in. True, will you leave Preston? Please! You can get three times the money."

"No. I'll stick, Amy. I should think you'd know that. If there's anythin' in these hints I reckon the Prestons need me all the more."

"I always loved you for that very trait," she said with passion. "But I wish here you didn't have it. Oh, Trueman, I tell you I dread this job of yours. That wild, beautiful Sunset Pass! That lovely, strange Thiry Preston! She'll fall in love with you. How could she help it? And you'll be dragged in with them. You'll have to kill this Ash Preston. Oh, he's a snake! He insulted me vilely, right on the street. There's not room enough on this range for you and him. You'll fight. I feel it, Trueman. A woman knows. Don't hush me. I *will* tell you. Trueman, I *don't* want you to kill another man!"

She wiped her eyes. "Forgive me," she said, more composed. "I didn't mean to speak out like that. I know how you hate it. Let us walk back now. You can drop me at my corner."

She did not speak again for several blocks. She held his arm closely. Rock did not have anything to say. The interview had surprised, annoyed, frightened, and softened him.

"True, I like you better than I used to," she said softly. "What will you wear at my masquerade?"

"Look here, little lady, that's not fair. I won't tell you."

"You must. I'll never be able to recognize you. I remember how clever you used to be. The unmasking will not take place until dinner. That'll be late, Trueman. And I'll want to know you, so in case I need you. You may have to throw Clink Peeples out."

"So the honor of protectin' you

falls to me," laughed Rock. "I've half a mind you're lyin'. But I'll stifle my suspicions. Amy, I've bought a dandy broadcloth frock suit, black. Also a fancy vest, shirt with ruffles, flowin' black tie and black mask. I'll come as a flash gambler."

"You'll look grand. Bet you make more than *one* heart ache," she returned, with a glance of mischief and regret. Then she extended her hand. "Good night, Trueman."

"Good night."

Next morning about eleven o'clock, Rock strolled out of the hotel on his way to see John Dabb. He was shown into that individual's private office, and walked into a richly furnished room, where two men sat smoking. One was John Dabb, not a great deal changed from the Westerner Rock had once worked for.

"Howdy, Mr. Dabb!" said Rock, easily. "Reckon you know me."

"Trueman Rock!" exclaimed Dabb in great surprise. Embarrassment succeeded his astonishment, which was perhaps what caused him to extend his hand. "Hesbitt, this is True Rock, one of the real riders we used to have," went on Dabb, recovering to introduce his comrade, who had also arisen. "Rock, shake hands with Hesbitt, one of our new ranchers."

Hesbitt bowed stiffly and spoke, without offering his hand.

Rock looked squarely at him. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Hesbitt."

His keen faculties, on edge now, gauged this man, unfavorably. Hesbitt was younger than Dabb, probably a man who had never been a cowboy, for he did not show the physical characteristics of the range. He was lean, sallow, hard, with sharp eyes close together and deep under bushy eyebrows.

"Well, Rock, to what am I indebted for this call?" queried Dabb.

"Remains to be seen whether you'll be indebted to me or not. Reckon that's up to you," replied Rock, and then he took a slow step nearer to Dabb's companion. "Mr. Hesbitt, I heard this mornin' that your foreman, Peeples, was in town, wantin' to see me."

"Yes, he got in early, and I believe does want to look you up."

"Reckon he can't be particular eager," drawled Rock. "I've been up and down street, and in and out of the hotel all mornin'—lookin' for Mr. Peeples."

"Ah! I see. I dare say he's very busy buyin' supplies," replied Hesbitt, nervously. "May I inquire—er—what you want of my foreman?"

"Nothin' so important—that is, to *me*," said Rock, with emphasis on the pronoun. "I just wanted to give Peeples opportunity to meet me. And to tell him somethin'."

"What?" asked Hesbitt, whose

sallow face slightly paled.

"Reckon I'd sure like you to know as well. I just want to give you a hunch. Not till two days ago did I ever hear of the Half Moon brand. And not till yesterday did I learn what outfit run it."

Manifestly Rock's cold, biting speech impressed Hesbitt, but scarcely to the acceptance of its content. He knocked the ashes off his cigar, and picked up his hat from the desk, without deigning another glance at Rock. "Dabb, your former cowboy's talk is queer, if true," he said curtly. "I'll leave you to renew old acquaintance. Good day."

"Hesbitt, you're new to this range," rejoined Dabb, a little caustic. "I've told you before. And your Wyoming cowboy foreman needs to be told—or he'll get into trouble. This is not Wyoming. I'm bound to tell you that Rock's talk is not queer. I'll gamble it's true. I never knew him to lie. And no old rider or cattleman on this range would *say* it, even if he thought it."

Hesbitt bowed and went out, jarring the door.

Dabb bit viciously at his cigar. "Some of these new cowmen make me sick. Rock, help yourself to a smoke and sit down."

"Dabb, I sure appreciate what you said to him about me," replied Rock, losing his coolness. "Fact is I'm surprised, too. I'd been told you had no use for me."

"Rock, that's not the point," returned Dabb quickly. "When I knew you were honest, I was bound to say so. Your connection with Preston has started rumors. Hesbitt has been losing more stock than any of us. His outfit is a hard-nut bunch from Wyoming. They think you're —well, I don't want to repeat gossip. There's too much of it. But whether or not I have any use for you I'd sure need to see proof of your dishonesty."

"That's straight talk. I like it and thank you. It makes what I wanted to say easier. Dabb, did I ever do you any dirt?"

"You quit me, left me in the lurch," replied Dabb testily. "I never overlook that in a foreman."

"But be fair, at least," responded Rock earnestly. "I had to leave quick—or kill another man, and one very generally liked here, Cass Seward."

"You may have thought so. Cass was a friend of mine. He told me once you didn't need to run off. He could have fixed it up. Arrested you—and let you off. It was an even break, you knew. What was that fellow's name? Anyway, I know everybody was glad you bumped him off."

"Ahuh! I'm sorry I didn't know that," said Rock broodingly. Then he shook off dark thoughts. "Dabb,

did you have anythin' else against me?"

The rancher thrummed on his desk, and puffed on his cigar, while revolving this query.

"Look me straight in the eye," went on Rock. "Man to man, Dabb. If you have cards on me lay them down. I'm comin' clean honest—and a lot might depend on you doin' the same."

"All right, Rock, I'll meet you," replied Dabb, flushing darkly, evidently stirred. "Straight out then, I've sort of held against you—that old affair of yours and Amy's."

"Good!" exclaimed Rock, cracking a fist in his palm. "That's just what I wanted you to admit. The old women gossips here gave Amy the worst of that affair. She was pretty and vain—and had a way with the boys. But she was good, and if they ever said otherwise they lied. I was in love with Amy, perhaps a little more so than I was with two other girls. But what I want to make clear to you, Dabb, is that Amy was never serious about me. I mean never in love as it was in her to be. And I'm satisfied that she never has been yet. Even with you—her husband! You'll excuse me, Dabb, but this is blunt straight talk."

"It is, by God!" Dabb said strainedly. "And to what end, Rock?"

"Amy's happiness," flashed Rock. "I met Amy the day I arrived in Wagontongue and again yesterday. Dabb, she'd scalp me alive if she ever found out I told you this. She's lonesome and unhappy. I don't believe Amy ever would have married you if she hadn't cared somethin' for you. But you've failed to win the best in her. Dabb, I don't suppose anyone ever dared to hit you this way. I don't care a damn how angry you get, if I can only make you see."

"You're making me see red, cowboy," replied Dabb hoarsely. "But go ahead. I've not the nerve to pull a gun on you."

"Dabb, I always had a hunch you weren't a bad fellow, under your skin. The range claimed you drove hard bargains, and the cowboys didn't exactly like you. Maybe that was justified. All the same, as ranchers go, you sure were white. You're rich now. You don't have to eat, sleep, drink, whistle, and smoke business. Pay some attention to your young and pretty wife! Like you did before you married her! Sol Winter told me you were as gay as any young buckaroo in town. Well, back-trail yourself. Take the girl away occasionally, to Kansas City or Denver. California in winter. And before long, old-timer, you'll be glad. If you don't do this, sure as I'm sittin' here, Amy is goin' to the bad. That's what I came to say and that's all." Rock

ended abruptly, forced by the older man's torture.

Dabb writhed in his chair. Fury and shame contested with the sense of fairness that seemed dragged out of his depths. "You are a—queer one—Rock," he stammered. "You've hit me where I live, and it hurts like sixty. But you talk like a man. And I'm not yet so set in my mind that I can't learn from any man. I'm not convinced, but I'm some staggered. If the truth turns out as straight as your talk—well, young man, you're on parole till I find out. Now since you've presumed to advise me on a delicate matter, I'll retaliate. Quit Preston!"

"Why?" snapped Rock.

"You know the range, Rock. Some things just can't be said."

"Because they can't be proved."

"Exactly."

"Well, I'll stick to Preston until these damned underhand rumors are proved—or until somebody suffers for startin' them."

"That may work out too late for you. I think I ought to tell you I've broken business relations with Preston."

"When?"

"Last Friday, when Preston was here."

"May I ask what were the business relations?"

"Preston had the small end of a cattle deal with me. I bought him out. And then I canceled all beef orders."

"How did Preston take that?"

"Kicked about the cattle deal. But I took it he was relieved to get out of selling me more beef."

"Relieved—what you mean?"

"He just struck me that way. Didn't ask me why. I was glad. My reason was good, but I could scarcely divulge it to him."

"Mind tellin' me?"

"Yes. I'd mind. It would necessitate violating someone's confidence. You'll have to find out for yourself, Rock."

"Reckon so. Well, I'm such a dumb hombre it may take me long. By the way, Dabb, are you still head of the Territory Cattle Association?"

"No, I resigned. Hesbitt was recently elected."

"Gee! Sorry to hear it."

"Why so? Hesbitt is said to be a better executive than I was."

"He never was a cowboy," returned Rock significantly. "Good day, Dabb. Reckon I'll meet up with you at the rodeo and the dance."

"Likely. I'll drop in on Amy's dance for a couple if I break a leg."

"Now you're shoutin', John."

In the afternoon, rather late, Rock walked 'round to see Winter. He was received almost with open arms.

"Hey, you been drinkin'?" expostulated Rock, holding his friend

at arm's length.

"Nope. That is, not red liquor. But I shore been drinkin' in Thiry's sweet smiles an' words."

"Dog-gone! I didn't expect her till tomorrow."

"True, she has been in half a dozen times," went on Winter. "Asked for you *every* time!"

"Sol, you lyin' old geezer! My heart might stand her askin' once. But six times! I ought to choke you."

"Son, mebbe it's not all gospel truth. When she first run in she was her old nice sweet cool self. Kissed me. Said she an' Alice were all fixed up nice out at my house. She asked if I'd seen you. An' I told her I hadn't yet today, but thet you'd be in. An hour later she came in again, somehow different. She bought buntin'. She was helpin' Amy Dabb decorate the dance hall. Asked had I seen you yet, an' I said no. She went out an' pretty soon came back, a little more different. She had a red spot in each cheek. An' so she came an' went, till the last time, a little while ago, when she was with Amy. Then you bet she didn't ask about you. True, shore as you're born, Amy had been fillin' poor Thiry full of guff about how wild you was over her, an' mebbe was yet."

Rock heard Winter, but only vaguely, for he was rushing out to the door, where through the window he had espied Thiry Preston. "Why, hello!" he said, forcing a pleasant surprise to hide his rapture, as he doffed his sombrero. "Heard you were here. Really didn't expect you till tomorrow."

She greeted him shyly, with absence of that inhibited expression which marked her meetings with him at Sunset Pass. She wore a light-blue dress and a new bonnet, the rather wide brim of which shaded her face somewhat. Still, he saw that her cheeks were not pale and her eyes not tranquil.

"We started at daybreak yesterday morning," she was saying. "The boys were no good at all, and the youngsters simply mad to come—so Dad sent us off a day ahead. Ash stayed home."

"That so?" replied Rock with constraint, though he tingled. "Well. It's too bad, if you're disappointed."

"I'm so greatly relieved I—I don't know myself," she replied, with unexpected candor. "I don't remember a Fourth that Ash hasn't

spoiled by getting drunk."

"May I walk with you a step?" asked Rock, changing the subject.

"You may. I'm on my last errand," she replied, and waved a gay hand at Winter.

Rock fell in with her short quick steps and made careful remarks about the weather, and the town being full of people, until they reached the baker's, where she said she was to order things for Mrs. Winter.

"I'll wait for you," said Rock.

"Are you afraid to walk into a bakeshop with a girl?" she asked, and the wide bonnet-brim tilted just far enough and long enough for him to catch a flash of gray eyes. "From what I've heard—recently—you could march into a lion's den—for a—for certain people," she said distantly.

"Ahuh, reckon I could—for—for a certain *person,*" replied Rock, beginning lamely and ending valiantly. That brought the blue bonnet-brim down to hide most of her face. Rock, however, thought he caught a glimpse of a coloring cheek. He escorted her into the store, stood beside her while she gave her orders, and accompanied her out.

"I'm to wait here for Allie. She won't be long," said Thiry, stopping outside.

"Hope she'll be late," returned Rock, trying vainly to find himself.

Presently she lifted her head and Rock devoured her lovely face before he realized it had never worn such an expression for him: doubt, disdain, petulance!

"You're going to the dance," she said. It was not a question.

"Reckon I'll drop in for a peep."

"Would you tell me what you'll wear?" she asked, sweetly—too sweetly not to be dangerous.

"Thiry, that'd spoil the fun. I sure want to fool you," he said.

"Have you not already fooled me?"

"I have not!" he shot at her, swift to speak his sudden passion. It startled her.

"Trueman Rock, you have a great deal to disprove and more to prove," she said, wide strange eyes on his. "You would not tell *me* what you were going to wear—so I'd recognize you first."

"Of course I'll tell you," he burst out.

"I don't care to know now. You would not see *me,* anyhow."

He could only stare mutely.

"Mr. Rock," she went on, without the scorn, "I had better explain my rather bold words. This dance was to be the first gay happy time for me since I grew up. Dad somehow prevented Ash from coming to town. He filled me with—with beliefs about how *you* would make it wonderful for me. I have no one but my brothers, and they all have

their girls. I—I dreamed myself into—no matter what. Then I come to town to have my ears filled to burning—all day long. The dance was to be given for you! You wouldn't even dance with any other woman but *her*! You were an old lover renewing his vows! You—"

"Thiry, hush!" interposed Trueman in rage, despair, and exaltation, all bewilderingly mingled. "I told you I didn't care what anyone said to you about my old affairs. But if *you* care, then I hate the very thought of them."

"Trueman, I don't know how much, or why, or if I care. But I trusted you and that woman has killed it."

"Oh no, Thiry, don't say that," he implored.

"But there's a secret understanding between you and her—for this dance."

"Yes, there is. But it's sure not sentiment on my part," he replied humbly. "Thiry, if you won't trust me, I shall have to give her away. And I never did that to a girl in my life."

"How could I trust a man who would betray any woman—much less her?"

"You couldn't. And I deserve that rebuke. But, Thiry, I'm dumfounded. Please be reasonable. Why, I was going to get *my* happy time just spying upon you from some corner. I never dared hope to get to dance with you. Good Heavens!"

"Trueman, I meant to dance only with my brothers, and perhaps one or two of the boys I know —and all the rest with you."

"Thiry Preston, you tell me this —this—" he cried, and failed to find adequate conclusion.

"Yes, I tell you," she retorted. "I couldn't do it at home, because I didn't know. But that's no difference."

"Of course it isn't. I should have made some wild dream come true. But, Thiry, it's not too late."

"Oh, it is," she said disconsolately, yet she seemed to hunger to be persuaded. "She has spoiled—"

"Listen," he broke in. "I meant to befriend Amy Dabb. She needs it, heaven knows, as you will see for yourself tomorrow night. But if you let her jealous tongue spoil *anythin'* for you, I'm through."

"Trueman, I could forgive a great deal, I think, but no bold lie," she murmured.

"I would not lie to you, to save my life."

"I apologize. It is I who am a little suspicious," she returned, softly. "Trueman, I make this excuse. I'm not used to intrigue, to deceit. Oh yes, I'm a woman and I haven't told you my real feelings. And I cannot. But I could never cope with Mrs. Dabb. She read my soul and tortured it. She thought I

might l-like you and meant to destroy."

"Thiry, did she destroy what little there might have been?" asked Rock.

She averted her face. "I don't know. I'm all excited. When I get back home I'll be appalled. But, oh, I—I want to have this dance! You'll understand me, Trueman, won't you? That's one thing I do trust."

"I'll do my best. But you are strange. Sure there never was a girl like you."

"In what way?" she asked.

"Thiry, I could not find words here," he replied, striving for calm. Indeed, where or when could he ever do justice to her strangeness, her inconsistency, her innocence and simplicity? "Perhaps at the dance—"

"Perhaps at the dance—then—if you disprove much and prove more I will—"

The arrival of Alice Preston, breathless and pink and merry, checked Rock's impassioned reply that otherwise he could not have resisted, even if Thiry had never completed her thought-compelling sentence. The girls, laughing and talking, started for home, and Rock accompanied them to the corner.

Just before they arrived there, a man and a woman hove in sight. Evidently she was trying to hurry away from him.

"I tell you no—no!" she cried, in a rage. Then Rock recognized the voice and the blazing black eyes. Amy Dabb! The man was a tall rider. He wore a red scarf, and his face was almost as red.

"See heah, sweetheart, you cain't come thet with me," he drawled, blocking her way.

"Shut up, you crazy fool! Someone might hear you," she cried.

Rock with a stride and a leap was upon them. "Somebody did hear you, Amy. Rustle now, with the girls," said Rock, sharply, as he gave the rider a hard thrust backward and then confronted him. "Howdy, Mister Red Scarf!"

Chapter Ten

Masquerade

The red-scarfed rider had evidently had a drink or two, but he appeared level-headed, and slowly the devilish geniality with which he had accosted Amy Dabb faded into cold, watchful speculation. His tawny gaze swept Rock from head to foot, and back again.

"Howdy, Mister Big Hat!" he replied, in imitation of Rock's greeting to him.

"My name is Rock."

"Aboot had thet reckoned," returned the rider guardedly.

"You're Hesbitt's foreman, Peeples," went on Rock curtly. "He told me you were lookin' for me."

"I shore was."

"Ahuh. Reckon you didn't look very hard," rejoined Rock.

"Wal, I cain't say there was any particular call to rustle."

Thus these two range-riders measured each other. Rock's reaction was vastly diverse from that following his encounter with Ash Preston. The foreman of Hesbitt's outfit appeared to belong to that type of cowboy whom Rock was wont to believe the salt of the earth.

"You're not drunk," replied Rock. "How's it you insult a married woman on the street?"

"Is thet any of your bizness?"

"It shore is. I'm an old friend of Amy Dabb's. Rode for her husband. Reckon it's not exaggeratin' to claim I'm his friend, too."

"All right, Rock, I apologize," returned the foreman readily, though resentfully. "But it shore ain't because I think I ought to."

"I heard what she said, and your answer. Now, tell me square, don't you think it was kind of low-down to brace her, right on the street?"

"Rock, I reckon it was," responded Peeples, staring hard. "An' how aboot my takin' you as a slick hombre—a liar—sweet on her yourself, an' wantin' the inside track?"

"Peeples, you can take me any way you like," responded Rock, speaking hard. "But if you do it that particular way you've got trouble on your hands right now."

"So I aboot reckoned," nodded the rider. "Strikes me I've got to take a lot for granted aboot you. Shore you know more aboot me than I do aboot you. It ain't a very square deal all around."

"I would take your word, if you shook on it," replied Rock.

"Wal, I guess I'd take yours."

"All right, Peeples. We're gettin' somewhere," said Rock more heartily. "Now, Peeples, tell me why you were lookin' for me?"

"Easier'n your other cracks," replied Peeples laconically. "I kept hearin' aboot you out on the range. Then lately you come back an' went to ride for Preston. Thet made me curious, an' I reckon I jest wanted to meet up with you an' see for myself."

"See what?"

"Wal, Rock, do you know one of them queer range shadows is creepin' over the Prestons?"

"I've heard so," replied Rock gloomily. "But I'm hopin' this one will blow over."

"Natural. But if it doesn't—if it clouds up black—you're shore goin' to get rained on, cowboy," said Peeples.

"Peeples, I like Gage Preston," went on Rock. "Do you know him?"

"Shore. Like him fine, too."

"I didn't take to Hesbitt," mused Rock, as if making comparisons.

"Shore I never did, either," admitted Peeples. "But—wal, I'm responsible for his stock. An' you can bet your bottom dollar I'd never be responsible for Preston's. Now aboot your connection with Preston. Speaks high for him to have you in his outfit. True Rock, clean an' square range-rider! Old hand at the game! Rode for the best ranchers in the Territory! Sounds awful good when some new cattleman like Hesbitt or some wonderin' puncher gets to talkin'. Rock, if Preston keeps you out there it's a safe bet he *is* rustlin' an' will ring you in with him, by hook or crook."

"So that's your angle?" muttered Rock, in deep thought. "Suppose I were to tell it to Ash Preston?"

"Wal, you'd drive me into a gun deal. An' you'd be breakin' confidence. After all, Rock, I cain't prove nothin'."

"I'll keep my mouth shut," rejoined Rock, and indeed his lips were tight as he spoke.

"All right, thet's what I'd expect. An' I'll say a little more. It always struck me thet this bizness of Ash Preston's chasin' the punchers away from Sunset Pass, on account of his sister, was aboot half fraud. I'll bet thet's a put-up job between Ash an' his father."

"I don't know. Sure he tried to chase me away," acknowledged Rock.

"An' played hell doin' it! Rock, take my hunch for what it's worth, as I'd take yours. Grab the girl an' raise the dust away from Sunset Pass. For if anythin' ever comes of this deal—as I suspect—an' you're still with Preston in any capacity, I swear I cain't see how you'd ever square yourself on the range."

The new town hall was the finest structure in Wagontongue, and the civic authorities, who happened to be mostly members of the Cattle Association, were proud of it and its expression of a progressive and prosperous community.

It was of Spanish design, low, rambling, many arched and aisled, painted white, with red tiled roof. The outside had been draped with flags and bunting in celebration of the national holiday. Two aisles with arched walls formed the outside of a large *patio.* Here and everywhere gay many-colored Chinese lanterns hung, singly from the tops of the arches, and in strings across from wall to wall. Flowers and desert shrubbery lined the walks and circled the fountain, where water tinkled musically. Flags and sage and evergreen furnished the interior decoration, very simply and attractively.

Trueman Rock strolled from the town hall, which he had in-

spected along with a multitude of visitors, back to his hotel. The street was full of people. Lobby and saloon were noisy, smoky. He went to his room to avoid the crowd. Events had multiplied already this day. What would the dance and the Fourth bring about? Rock was inclined to the idea that it might be just as well for him to spend the rest of the day in his room. When he left it next he would be in masquerade.

Darkness had long set in when he left the hotel. Rock ran the gauntlet of merry jests, admiring glances from dusky eyes, laughter and query, to the entrance at the main corridor of the hall. Inside the door was a gate, guarded by men, one of whom was the town sheriff, very important and pompous, with his silver badge conspicuous. Two placards struck Rock's eye. One read: NO ADMITTANCE TO ANYONE NOT IN MASQUERADE. And the other sign, larger, read: CHECK YOUR HARDWARE AND BOTTLE.

"Howdy, gambler!" greeted the sheriff. "'Scuse me while I search you. Mrs. Dabb's orders."

His second slap at Rock located the gun under the long frock coat. "Ha! Not on the hip! Hangin' low, eh? Wal, cowboy, unbuckle an' pass."

The heavy gun belt went into the hands of an attendant, who deposited it on a shelf where already a row of weapons glittered. Rock received a ticket.

Rock passed on down the corridor to where it opened into the *patio*. There was music somewhere and sound of voices and laughter. Then he saw masqueraders in goodly numbers, and he strolled down the right aisle, where under every arch gay young people, safe in their disguises, ogled the strollers and made remarks. The lights from the lanterns were just strong enough to lend glamour and softness to the Spanish aisles, the beautiful *patio* and the brightly clad maskers.

A girl, slight of stature, passed Rock to peer at him with challenging eyes, disguised if not hidden by a red mask. Her costume was Spanish, gold and black, very graceful and pretty. It could not be Amy, for surely she would wear something magnificent. A masker in cowboy attire accosted her, to be gayly repulsed. She passed on, and Rock forgot her in his growing, searching gaze for someone he would know the instant she appeared.

Someone took his arm lightly. *"Buenas tardes, senor,"* said a low voice at his elbow.

Rock bowed gallantly to the slim creature on his arm. He did not recognize her, but saw that she was the Spanish girl in gold and

black.

"Buenas tardes, senorita," replied Rock, peering into the black holes in the red mask.

She averted her face and walked with him, surely aware of the attention they roused. Rock grasped suddenly that there appeared to be a little pressure on his arm, a gradual but sure guidance of his steps. Being intent upon this unknown lady who had taken possession of him, Rock had not observed where they were heading. He was to find that they were entering the dance-hall, where many masqueraders had assembled, plainly awaiting the mysterious first partner that chance might bestow upon them.

This Spanish girl was enterprising, not to say bold. Rock felt himself further drawn into the subtle charm of the atmopshere. Then the orchestra burst into music, a languorous Spanish waltz, once Rock's great favorite

The girl who had led him there swayed to the rhythm toward him, slowly lifting her hand to his shoulder. "You handsome gambler! You don't know me!" she cried in arch reproach.

"Amy!" exclaimed Rock incredulously.

"Sure. Do you like me in this costume?"

"Great! You sure are a Spanish girl. Fooled me plumb good."

"Not a soul recognized me," she said, in delight. "I'll tell no one but you. Come, this is your old favorite waltz."

Before Rock knew what was happening she was in his arms, light as thistle-down, and they were whirling, gliding to dreamy strains that found the old chord deep in his memory.

"Trueman, hold me tighter," she whispered, and leaned back against his arm, to look up at him. The dark eyes seemed inscrutable wells under the red mask.

"Behave yourself, Mrs. Dabb," he returned warningly, with a laugh. "Reckon I don't know quite all due my hostess, but sure not that."

"Well, if you won't, I'll have to hug you," she went on. "Oh, I could hug you and kiss you before everybody! Trueman, *what* did you do to my husband?"

"Did I do anythin'?" asked Rock, helpless in the unexpectedness of this attack. His old knowledge of Amy's resourcefulness tried in vain to fortify him.

"Did you? Trueman, he came home the other day, at noon—something unheard of," she went on swiftly. "He told me you'd been in to see him. That you had raked him over the coals. That you had cleared up something about you and me! Then he told me he had been sore and jealous for a long

time. He admitted being mean, selfish, suspicious. He'd neglected me shamefully. He would turn over a new leaf. He would try to be young again. Oh, he knocked me cold! Since then he has been like he was when he courted me. And most amazing of all, he's to drop in here tonight—in masquerade. He wouldn't even tell what he'd wear."

"Good Lord!" said Rock under his breath.

"You should say thank the good Lord. How'd you do it, old boy? It's a miracle. And maybe it's not too late. I was, I guess, on the ragged edge."

"All past, Amy," he said cheerfully.

"I don't know, Trueman. But I'm happy tonight—as I haven't been in years." Then, leaning her head forward to his shoulder, she grew silent. Rock was reminded that the better side of Amy had always come uppermost when she was dreamily, happily excited. When she was jealously excited she was about as tractable as a wildcat. Round and round they swung amid the colorful murmuring throng. The scrape and thud of cowboy boots drowned the patter and slide of lighter-footed dancers. Then suddenly the music ceased.

"Trueman, you always were such a wonderful dancer," murmured Amy, still under a spell. "I wish I had every dance with you."

"You flatter me, Amy. But it sure tickles me."

"Of course you'll dance often with Thiry Preston?" she asked, the old jealousy flaring up.

"Reckon I haven't the nerve yet to ask even one. Besides, I probably won't recognize her."

"Bah! That girl couldn't disguise herself in a burlap sack," returned Amy flippantly.

Amy's last words added to Rock's sudden realization of what thin ice he was skating on.

"Trueman, I'll have to stand for you paying some attention to Thiry," went on Amy passionately. "But be careful. If you dance more with her than with me—Lord help *her*!"

Amy must have had certain duties as a hostess, for outside she slipped away from Rock and mingled with the laughing, curious assemblage. He made no effort to follow, but haunted the long corridor, studying the new arrivals. He was at the entrance to the *patio,* standing close to the wall, when a small party entered the corridor and came quickly down.

"Look!" spoke up a woman to her neighbor on a bench near Rock. "That girl in white. Colonial wedding-gown! Isn't she just lovely? Who can it be?"

This remark caused Rock to take a second glance at the enter-

ing party. It struck him that the girl in the wedding-gown was certainly worth looking at. At first she did not appear to be masked at all, but as she drew closer he saw that she wore a close-fitting mask, scarcely any whiter than her powdered face.

Her hair was done up in some amazing style and as colorless as snow. Arms and neck, of exquisite contour, likewise were of a dazzling whiteness. The gown, one of those hoop-skirted, many-ruffled affairs Rock had seen in pictures, took up the space of three ordinarily dressed women. Indeed, there appeared scarcely space enough for the girl to pass him.

Trueman flattened himself against the wall, as he had observed the two cowboys do. Nevertheless, the young lady so marvelously gowned was forced to sweep her skirts aside to avoid contact. The momentary halting of the party, evidently to choose a direction, brought this Colonial masquerader so close to Rock that he meant to step forward and allow her more room. But she seemed to be looking at him and he felt suddenly rooted to the spot.

"Gurls, you shore passed the dressin'-room," remarked one of the youths.

They turned, some of them laughing, and the wonderful girl in white pressed close to Rock in passing, still apparently gazing at him. As the soft, fluffy, perfumed gown swept him, Rock felt a hand touch his—slip a folded paper into his palm with quick pressure. Then she passed and he leaned there staring. She vanished with the others.

Rock's trembling fingers tightened on the paper. It was a note. That girl had been Thiry. In one glance she had pierced his disguise. And he had been far indeed from returning the compliment. What a joke on him! His vaunted perspicacity, his vain sense of a lover's assurance, went into eclipse. And in its place shot a thrill at her cleverness, her superb masquerade.

Coming down to earth with a jerk, Rock peered into his palm at the note, then rushed off to find a light by which he could read it. Finally he found one under which he thought he could discern the writing, and here, after a keen glance around, he opened the note.

Dear Truman

I will know you the instant I lay eyes on you. Will you me? I am in terrible fear, but I will come to the dance, cost what it may.

Ash is in town, hiding. I do not know what he means. It may be there is some other reason for his action. Allie and I will go to the Farrells' to dress, and come with their crowd

Ash never saw my great-grand-

mother's wedding-dress. He won't recognize me, when he comes. For he will come! You must keep close watch over me, else I would not dare take the risk. He is capable of stripping me before the crowd. I will dance with the Farrell boys a little—the rest with you. I shall not stay till they unmask. I want to go before he knows me. You must take me away before that.

It may be madness. But I let my heart become set on this one dance. I grow furious at the thought of giving it up. I don't know myself of late. I will come—if only to—

Thiry.

Rock did not draw a breath during his swift perusal of this note. Though he could not believe he was awake the words were there, on white paper, in ink, clear and firm, in even, beautiful script.

What did they betray? He could not subdue his pounding heart, but he strangled the leaping, whirling, rapturous thoughts. She asked his protection. Thiry Preston—who not long before had begged him to leave her!

When Rock read again the sentence in which she confessed that Ash was capable of stripping her before the crowd, in his sudden realization of its content he froze in deadly fury. But it shook him and passed with the realization that she had promised to dance mostly with him.

Rock placed the note inside his vest and strode back toward the corridor. As he entered it, Thiry came out of a door halfway down and seemed to float toward him. They met, both aware of others present. Rock, removing his hat, made her an elaborate bow.

"Lady from Virginia, I salute you," he said gallantly.

"Sir Knight of the Card Table," she replied, and offered her hand.

Rock clasped it and kissed it with the old-fashioned courtesy due the character she personified. But they acted no more. She seemed silently confused as he led her to the *patio*. There in the subdued glow of the lanterns they were comparatively alone.

"Thiry! You paralyzed me," he said. "I didn't know you. I didn't *know* you. And, oh, how lovely you look!"

She murmured her thanks. They stood under an archway beside the fountain. The falling water tinkled in harmony with the soft strains of music. For them it was neither the place nor the time for calmness.

"How ever did you know me?" he asked.

"It was the way you stood."

"Reckon that makes me awful happy—an' fearful, too, Thiry."

"You! You have little to be fearful about. But I—"

"Never mind. If I ever had eyes

I'll use them tonight. I'll let no insult, no humiliation touch you. Thiry, where'd you get that gorgeous gown?"

"It was my great-grandmother's wedding-dress. We are from Virginia."

"Virginia? Your father told me Missouri."

"Yes, after the war. I was little then. The war ruined us and we moved to Missouri."

"Ahuh! You were always pretty to look at, in anythin'. But now you're—oh!—beyond the poor compliments—and hopes, too, I reckon, of a range rider."

"I'm glad you like me, Trueman, but don't rub it in," she said naively. "In a few days I'll bake bread and milk the cows again."

"You'll be all the better for that."

The music ceased and the gay dancers poured out of the hall to promenade in couples and quartets and crowds, all intent, it appeared, to peep under masks and find one another out.

"My brothers—the twins and Al—and the Farrell boys know me, of course," said Thiry, as if remembering where she was. "We must find them. Then after a few dances I'll be free—if—if you—"

"Thiry, there's no if—now or ever," he replied unsteadily.

"Will you dance while I dance?"

"No. I'll watch you—and see if anyone else is watchin' you."

"Oh, but surely you must *want* to dance some?" she queried.

"Only with you."

"Not Amy Dabb?" she flashed.

"Not Amy Dabb," he said, turning to find her face averted.

"But, Trueman, she is your hostess. If I remember correctly, she meant to embody the duty of all her masculine guests in *your* attendance."

"Did she?" replied Rock, a little nettled at her satire. "You mean she gave you a hunch I'd dance all *my* dances with her?"

"Something or other like that," murmured Thiry.

"Reckon she was just talkin'."

"Then *I* was wrong to believe her. Forgive me. But I didn't see how you could be so—so—such a liar."

"Thiry, I couldn't lie to you," he returned, with low voice ringing. "Save me agony by believin' that now. For some day you'll know."

"But you must dance with your hostess—at least once," said Thiry, hastily.

"Once. Would you stand for it once? I mean, straight out—do you *want* me to dance with you instead of Amy Dabb?"

"Yes, I do," she returned hotly. "She hurt me. She said catty things all in a nice way. She offered to lend me a dress. She made me feel a—a country bumpkin. I told you before

what she hinted about you. It's selfish, little, miserable of me to want to show her. But she made me almost hate her."

"Thiry, my obligation is paid," replied Rock, trying to contain himself. "I have had that one dance with Mrs. Dabb. She met me. I didn't recognize her until she made herself known. It's over. So there."

"I'd like you to dance with Allie," returned Thiry shyly. "She won't tell on you. For that matter, it'd be fun, if we can fool her."

"Fine. Let's find her and your friends."

Chapter Eleven

Bare Fists

Thiry had introduced Rock to her sister Alice as Senor del Toro of Las Vegas. And Rock felt that so far as dancing was concerned he had acquitted himself creditably. Alice was like a fairy on her feet and Rock could not have forced her out of step if he had tried.

The dance was soon over, and Rock surrendered Allie to her next partner. He became all eyes then. He was no longer a masquerader, nor a lovelorn shadow of his lady. He shifted in one moment to the cool, searching cowboy on a trail. His searching gaze was concerned with the masculine element of that gay crowd.

He lounged around the door of the hall during two dances before he convinced himself that Ash was not among the cowboys dancing. Then he strolled down one long aisle and up the other, peering at every man and into every shadow. Likewise he searched the *patio*. Then he went into the corridor and toward the entrance, where the sheriff and his deputies still held forth.

When Ash Preston came in he would have to be masked and he could not hide a gun from those laconic Westerners. This afforded Rock relief. Returning to his post just inside the dance-hall door, he took up his vigil there.

Another dance had just started. The big hall was a wonderful spectacle of movement, color, youth, beauty, and humor.

Then Rock espied Thiry, conspicuous in white and notable for her grace. She was dancing with one of the lanky youths with whom she and Alice had come. As they came around in the gliding circle she espied Rock over her partner's arm. What a smile she gave Rock! It made his heart beat faster.

She appeared flushed under the white mask and powder. No doubt of her enjoyment! Probably for the hour she had forgotten the menace of Ash Preston. Soon that dance ended, and as the laughing throng pressed in a stream out the door,

someone—a woman—thrust her face close under Rock's.

"Traitor!" she whispered, and went on. The wine-dark hot eyes, through the red mask, the gold-and-black Spanish gown, so striking on the slender figure, belonged to Amy Dabb.

Trueman whistled to keep from swearing. He had actually forgotten Amy. Dance after dance had gone by, and he had never even seen her. His dismay was short-lived, in that he looked around from the disappearing Amy to see Thiry close at hand, coming alone.

"Senor del Toro, you look lonesome," she said gayly. "Are there no charming senoritas here?"

"I can see only one."

"Come. The rest is yours," she said, and took his arm.

"Has anyone discovered you?"

"Only one I know of, Amy Dabb. She was quick to see through it."

"Well. Did she say anythin'?"

"I rather think so. She said: 'Hello, Thiry! You look great. But wedding-gowns don't always mean wedding-bells.' "

"Humph! That was sweet of Amy, now. Thiry, I reckon there's not a young man at this dance who wouldn't ring weddin'-bells for you."

"Rash flattery, Trueman," she retorted. "There must be many. I know five boys who are madly in love with their respective partners."

"Thiry, I make number six," said Rock, and quickly looked away, too guilty to dare to see how she took his remark. She made no reply at all. In silence they went the rounds of the *patio,* then up one arched aisle and down another, back to the dancing-floor.

Thiry looked up with inscrutable eyes. "You broke your word. You make me remember," she said reproachfully, as she gave way to his encircling arm.

A pang shot through Rock, but he did not think it was remorse. The miracle that tore him was his possession of this lovely girl. She was in his arms. She yielded to, rather than resisted, the close embrace he could not have forsworn to save his life. That dance was brief as a fleeting moment, but endless in its intangible mystery and joy.

Again they strolled under the magic rose and purple of the dimming lanterns, and on to the secluded bower in the *patio.* Here the stars shone white and watchful through the foliage. The water tinkled off in the darkness.

"It's very—warm," murmured Thiry, as Rock leaned over her in the shadow.

"Take off your mask," he suggested.

"No, senor."

Trueman took her hand in his.

It was an almost instinctive action on his part. She made no attempt to withdraw it, greatly to his surprise and joy.

"Trueman, you must take me home soon," she said, as if coming out of a spell. The time and the place, the languorous atmosphere of this Spanish edifice, which, though new, seemed old in beauty and romance, the music, the dancers, the youth had indeed called to Thiry Preston.

"Oh no, not now. Just one more dance," pleaded Rock. "You said the rest were mine."

"But I'd forgotten."

"What?"

"Ash will come any moment. I feel it—here," she whispered, her hand on her breast.

"Thiry, he is not here now. I've looked clear through every man in the outfit. Please risk it."

"Well, then—one more."

But at the end of this dance she forgot again or could not resist the joy of the hour. Once more Rock led her to their shadowed corner, once more he held an unresisting hand.

"Take off your mask," he begged again.

"Can you put it back on—right?" she asked, a little tremulously.

"Sure I can."

Then she was unmasked under his worshiping eyes, under the dim rose light of the lantern above and the far, white, and knowing stars. Once she lifted her eyes to him—eyes that betrayed the spell of the moment—then no more. "You do not talk, senor," she said, trying for conversation.

"How can I? I'm holdin' your hand."

"Oh, so you are! Well, let go."

"Pull it away," he whispered daringly.

But she did not.

Rock won her to stay one more dance, reveled in his power to persuade her, though his conscience flayed him. What risk he might incur for her! But he gambled with his happiness.

"Trueman, we must go now," she said nervously.

"Yes. But don't you hate to?" he returned jealously.

"No. I'm too thankful for—for all it's been."

They reached the *patio*. Something had happened, as Rock guessed from excited voices. A girl cried out in dismay.

"Hey, look out there!" called someone, unmistakably a cowboy.

"He snatched at my mask," replied a girl, angrily.

"He got mine," added another woman.

Rock drew Thiry out of the press. "Some cowboy snatchin' masks," he said hurriedly.

Suddenly into the open space before him leaped a lithe figure of a

cowboy, wearing a red handkerchief as a mask. He was as quick as light—so quick that Rock scarcely guessed his purpose in time to thwart it. But Rock was on the wrong side of Thiry. One sweep of hand tore Thiry's mask from her white face! She cried out and spasmodically clutched Rock's arm.

The cowboy appeared to leap up. He snatched off the red handkerchief that masked him, to disclose the livid face of Ash Preston. His evil eyes, like coals of blue fire, flashed over her face, her bare neck and arms, her spreading ruffled gown.

"Ash," gasped Thiry, clutching Rock's arm tighter, "meet Senor del Toro—my masquerade partner!"

"Senor Hell!" he bit out, incredibly cold and fierce. Like a snake's head his hand shot out, to fasten in Thiry's bodice and tear with fiendish swiftness.

In one single action Rock freed himself from Thiry and struck Preston on the side of the face. He went down with a thud. Women screamed; men shouted excitedly; and all spread back hurriedly. Up bounded Preston, with catlike quickness, his hand flashing back for his gun. But it was not there. He had passed the sheriff and had forgotten. His wolfish face gleamed fiercer. His tawny hair stood up.

"Greaser, I'll kill you for thet!" he ground out.

"Caramba!" replied Rock, and made at Preston with terrific fury. His onslaught was like a battering-ram. He cared nothing for Preston's sudden blows. He broke through them, beat him back, and knocked him against the wall. Ash fell, but got up cursing, to come back wilder than ever, his face the redder for blood. There was a swift interchange of blows, then one from Rock staggered Preston. Another swift and hard, hitting solid like an ax on beef, sent Preston in a long fall.

Before he could rise Rock plunged upon him, beat him with right, left, right, left—tremendous blows that made Ash sink limp. Rock seized him by the neck, choked and shook him as a terrier with a rat, and rising, dragged him to the fountain and threw him bodily into the shallow water. Ash lay on his back, his head just above the surface.

Rock, remembering his mask, felt for it and found it intact. That helped release him from the grip of an awful anger. Thiry's white mask lay where Preston had dropped it. Snatching it up, Rock whirled to see some woman in the act of covering Thiry's naked shoulders and bosom with a shawl.

"Come—we'll—get out—of here," he panted hoarsely, and placing a firm hand under her arm he led

her away from the gaping crowd, down the corridor toward the outlet. The voices of excited people grew fainter. Rock halted long enough to produce his check and get his gun belt, which he threw over his left arm.

"What's up in thar?" queried the sheriff, sharply eying Rock.

"Some fool cowboy snatchin' masks off the ladies," replied Rock, and hurried Thiry out through the crowd of Mexicans to the street and darkness.

Thiry was weak. She leaned on his arm. Still she kept up with his rapid steps. Not for three blocks did Rock speak, nor did she.

"He—didn't know you," she burst out, then. "Called you greaser!"

"Yes, that's the only good thing about it," returned Rock.

She was sobbing a little and clinging to the arm with which Rock upheld her. "He tore my waist—almost off. Oh, I don't mind the shame of that—so much. But the gown mother treasured. She loved it so—she'll be heart-broken."

"What's a dress?—That can be—mended," he panted. "But I kept you there. Too long! It was my—fault—my fault. If I had only left when you wanted to go! After my promise to you!"

"Trueman, I shouldn't have gone. I knew something dreadful would happen. I *told* you. Only he was worse than I ever saw him."

"Worse! He was a hydrophobia skunk!"

"Oh, Ash! My brother!" she cried brokenly.

Her grief tortured Rock, but he did not have it in him to retract his words. What language could do justice to Ash Preston! They hurried on, to the edge of town, down the pine-skirted road. Presently they reached Winter's house, which sat back among the trees. Rock saw a light. He wanted to say good night to Thiry at the gate, but could not. She still clung to him. At the porch he halted, and helped her up.

It was shaded there by trees, but he could still see her pale face and the great eyes, strange and dark in the night. Before he knew what he was doing he clasped his arms round her, as she stood a little above him. She did not repulse him, but she pressed her hands against his shoulders. Thus they looked at each other in the shadow.

"Forgive me, Thiry," he implored.

"There's nothing to forgive."

"I'll go to my room before anyone sees me. Ash didn't know me. He never will."

"*She* will tell," said Thiry hopelessly.

"Amy Dabb!" exclaimed Rock, with a start. "She did know. But she'll have no chance tonight.

They'll pack him out of there pronto. Tomorrow I'll find some way to shut her mouth."

"Yes, you will," said Thiry, with sad derision. "Don't waste your breath, Trueman. Perhaps it will not occur to her that Ash didn't know you."

"Then let's hope for the best." Rock tightened his arms a little, drew her closer. "Thiry, kiss me good night," he whispered.

"Trueman!" she exclaimed, and tried to draw away. But he held her, and as she turned her face he managed to kiss her cheek.

"Now you've done it!" she cried.

What he had done she did not say, but she ceased to pull away. That emboldened him. Still he drew back the better to see her averted face.

"What's one more offense?" he queried. "I've ruined my hopes tonight—or I have found them glorified. Oh, Thiry, how I love you! Kiss me good night."

"No!" Yet she seemed weakening. He felt her quiver in his arms.

"Then let me kiss you? It might be the first and last time. For if Ash finds me out I'll have to leave this country. Else I'd have to kill him!"

"You'd go away for me?" she flashed, suddenly quickened and revivified, and her hands went to his shoulders.

"I promise you."

"You love me so much?"

"Thiry girl, I love you more than I can prove."

Blindly, with unreckoning impulse, she bent and met his upturned lips with her own. Quickly, with a gasp, she broke away to stare a moment, as if some realization had stricken her, then she fled across the porch and into the house.

Ash Preston did not return to Sunset Pass for a week after the Fourth. Rumor drifted down by a rider that Preston was hunting for the Mexican who had beaten him at the dance.

It was an anxious and brooding time for Trueman Rock, more, perhaps, because of Thiry's unconcealed dread than for his own sake. Nevertheless, he never drew an easy breath, despite the rumor, until Ash returned, sober yet showing the effects of a prolonged debauch.

One moment Rock stood on the porch, his hand quivering, while Ash strode over from his cabin. Sullen, his face black and blue, still swollen, he presented no encouraging aspect. But manifestly that moment proved he did not know or suspect Rock had been his assailant. Then the suspense of this meeting for Rock ended when Thiry almost fainted in Ash's arms.

"Aw, Thiry, I'm sorry," rasped out Ash, while he held her on the

bench.

Rock did not tarry with the family after supper that night. He carried away with him a look from Thiry's eyes—the first in which she had met his since that unforgettable last moment on Winter's porch—and it drove him to pace under the pines, to throw back his head, to fill his lungs with the sage-laden air of the Pass, to cast exultant defiance up at the silent, passionless white stars.

He paced a beat from the open back to the gloom of the thick-spreading trees. On the soft mats of pine needles his feet made no sound; against the black shadow of the slope his figure could not be seen. But his own sharp eye caught a dark form crossing in front of a cabin light. He heard a voice low but clear—Gage Preston's: "Ash, come hyar."

Suddenly he made them out, perilously close upon him. Silently he sank behind the log, immensely glad that it lay between him and the approaching men.

"What you want?" growled Ash.

"Sit down there," ordered Preston.

Rock felt the jar of the log where evidently Preston had pushed Ash. Noiselessly craning his neck, Rock saw the dim figure of the father, bending over. Then Rock espied Ash sitting not ten feet from where he lay. It seemed to Rock that cold blood oozed from his very marrow. If caught there he would have to fight for his life. Almost he ceased to breathe. The pounding of his heart sounded like a muffled drum.

"What the hell's got into you?" demanded Ash.

"What the hell's got into *you*—thet you hang on in town, lookin' for trouble, makin' more fer me?" countered the father sternly. "I needed you hyar. There's work no one else can do."

"But, Pa, I wanted to kill thet Senor del Toro," protested Ash, almost plaintively.

"Bah! Senor del Toro? Why, you lunkhead, thet make-believe Spaniard was Trueman Rock!"

"Hell, no!" snapped Ash, hotly. "I had thet hunch. But I was wrong. Next mornin' I went to Thiry. I told her thet black-masked pardner of hers was Rock an' I was a-goin' to kill him. She fell on her knees. An' she wrapped her arms around me. An' she swore to God it wasn't Rock. Pa, I had to believe her. Thiry never lied in her life."

"Mebbe I'm wrong," choked Preston, as if a will not his own wrenched that admission from him. "But whoever he was he gave you plumb what I'd have given you. You disgraced Thiry. You shamed her. You hurt her so she's been ill. She—who's loved you all her life!"

"Shet up, Pa," wailed Ash, writhing. "I can stand anythin' but thet."

"Wal, you shore have a queer streak in you. Yellow clear through when it comes to Thiry. But fer her you'd be a man. An' we could go on with our work thet's callin' fer all a man's brains. You can't be relied upon, as you used to be. Now listen, somethin's up out there on the range. I've done some scoutin' around lately. I've talked with the Mexican sheepherders. Too many riders snoopin' around Sunset Pass! Today I seen some of Hesbitt's outfit. An' Slagle asked me sarcastic like why Clink Peeples was over hyar so much. Ash, there's a nigger in the woodpile. I shore don't like the smell."

"Clink Peeples had better keep away from the Pass."

"There you go again. What good will it do to throw a gun on Peeples? If they're suspicious, thet'd only make them worse. What'd you do with them last Half Moon hides?"

"I hid them."

"Where? Didn't you take them to Limestone Cave, as I ordered you?"

"I packed some there. It was too far, an' I was tuckered out. I hid the rest under the culvert."

"But I told you not to hide any more there. I always was scared of thet culvert. Once a big rain washed some out. It could happen again."

"Wal, it ain't too late. I'll take Boots tomorrow night, an' we'll pack the fresh ones over to Limestone."

"No. The ground's soft since it rained. You'd leave tracks. An' thet's too risky with these new riders searchin' around. Better leave them. An' we'll lay off butcherin' fer a spell."

"Lay off nothin'. With all them orders fer beef? I guess not. Pa, there's room fer a thousand hides down in the old well."

"Ash, I tell you we'll lay off killin' till this suspicion dies down."

"Wal, I won't lay off, an' I reckon I can boss the boys," replied Ash implacably.

Then Preston cursed him, cursed him with every hard word known to the range, and some besides, cursed until he was spent from passion.

"This hyar rider, Rock," spoke up Ash, as if he had never heard the storm of profanity, "when you goin' to fire him?"

"Rock? Not at all," replied Preston wearily. He was beaten.

"Wal, then, I will. He's been around too long, watchin' Thiry, an' mebbe us, too."

"Ash, haven't you sense enough to see thet Rock's bein' hyar is good fer us?" asked Preston, gird-

ing himself afresh. "Never was a rider hyar so trusted as Rock. Thet diverts suspicion from us. It was lucky he came."

"But he might find us out."

"It ain't likely. Shore he doesn't want to."

"He might stumble on to it by accident. Or get around Thiry an' scare it out of her."

"Wal, if he *did*, thet wouldn't be so bad. She could keep his mouth shut. He loves her well enough to come in with us. Only I'd hate to ask her to do it."

"An' if she did win him over, what would *he* want?" hissed Ash.

"Huh! Reckon thet's easy to answer. An' I'm tellin' you, Ash, Thiry would like Rock if she had half a chance."

A knife plunged into Ash's vitals could scarcely have made him bend double and rock to and fro, like that thrust of Preston's.

"She'd like him, huh? So thet's why she made me promise not to pick a fight with him—"

"Wal, Ash, if circumstances come up we can't help or beat, what'n hell can we do? I told you ages ago thet Thiry is bound some day to love some lucky rider. It can't be helped. An' it might be Rock. Which'd be most infernal lucky fer us."

"Lucky fer him! Haw! Haw!—I'd shoot his heart out."

Preston rose to loom menacingly over his son. "You can't murder him in his sleep, or shoot him in the back. Thet'd look bad in Wagontongue. It'd just about ruin us. An' if you call him out to an even break—why, Ash, he'll kill you! Savvy? Rock is cold as ice, as quick as lightnin'. He has a hawk eye. I'm warnin' you, Ash."

Chapter Twelve

Rock Calls a Bluff

Long after Preston stalked away Rock lay behind the log, thinking over the peril he had been in and the revelation that had accompanied it. Late he stole like an Indian to his cabin, made his bed inside, and barring the door, lay down just as he was.

In the morning he watched from his window until Ash left, then went out to breakfast. Thiry did not appear.

Preston came out while Rock was eating and said, "Rock, I've a job for you that'll take you away some time. The boys are gettin' a pack outfit ready. They know where to go. I want five hundred head of two-year-old steers in the flat down there by Slagle's ranch. By August."

"You're the boss, Preston. But are you sure you won't need me more right here?"

Preston bent toward Rock and lowered his voice. "It ain't what

I'd like or need. I had no idee last night thet I'd send you off this mornin'. But it popped into my head."

"Ahuh! Who popped it?"

"Thiry. She asked me to. Ash is wuss than ever before. An' fer once Thiry seemed to be thinkin of somebody else but him."

"How is she feelin', Preston?"

"Wal, she perked up when I told her I'd send you."

"Suits me fine. Don't mind tellin' you, boss, that Ash is almost gettin' on my nerves."

"Haw! Haw! Almost gettin', hey? Wal, if you ain't made out of stone I'll eat my hat. My nerves *are* shot to pieces."

Rock got up and stepped over the bench, without looking at Preston. "Small wonder, boss. Reckon you'd do well to hawg-tie Ash an' hang 'round the Pass for a month."

This speech had been the outcome of impressions Rock had received from Preston's manner and words. He spoke it curtly, with never a glance, then he walked away toward his cabin. It did not suit Rock just then to leave the Pass without a hint to Preston.

Rock repaired to his cabin and rolled his bed and packed the things he would need. He wavered between two strong desires—to see Thiry before he left and write to her. The better course would be to write, because he could put on paper what there would be no chance to speak. No sooner did he decide than he realized it was an opportunity not to be lost. Therefore, with pencil and paper he sat down at his little table and began, with hand that he could not keep steady and heart which accelerated a beat for every word.

Thiry Darling,

Your Dad has ordered me away for several weeks, maybe more. I am glad to go, though not to see your sweet face for so long will be terrible. But I shall work like a beaver, and content myself with thinking of you by day and dreaming of you by night—with praying for your happiness and welfare.

I want you to know this, so that while I'm gone you may remember me often. My conscience flays me still for what I brought upon you at the dance. But I don't ask forgiveness for that so much as for what happened on Winter's porch. Still, if I had no more to sustain me, Thiry, through what seems to be the hardest trial of my life, that kiss you gave me would be enough. I know you meant only unheeding gratitude. But nevertheless you kissed me, and I can never be a rational being again.

Don't worry, Thiry dear, about Ash, or me, or whatever it is that is wrong. You can't help it. And it will not turn out so bad as you

think. Nothing ever does. I believe that if you were to fall into some really dreadful trouble I could save you. Now what do you think of that for a fellow's faith in himself? Of course, by trouble, I mean something concerning Ash. I must not deceive you, dearest, your brother is the kind of range man that comes to a bad end. You must face this with courage. You must realize that he might involve your father, you, and all of your people in something through which you could suffer.

It is no use to try to change Ash. You waste your strength. The more you do for him the less he will appreciate. I think you can only pray and hope for the best. You will have a good long rest from my disturbing presence, during which time you must think earnestly and fight for that endurance women of the West must have.

My mother and sister tried the pioneer life for a while. It was too much for them. But you are of stronger stuff. Remember that Allie and Lucy must find their spirit in you.

I shall think of you every sunset, and see you come out to watch the Pass.

Ever, Trueman.

Returning to the Preston cabin, Rock looked for Alice to deliver his note to Thiry, but as she was not there he ventured of his own accord. Slipping it under the door of Thiry's cabin, he beat a rather precipitate retreat. Nevertheless, he heard the door open, and turning saw Thiry pick up the missive, and then stand to look at him. Rock waved his hand. Would she return his salute?

She did not, to his dismay. Still he turned again and again to look over his shoulder as he hurried away. Finally she waved, then quickly shut the door. Rock's dismay was transformed to delight. She had his letter and she had waved good-by. He could not have asked or hoped for more. That would serve him well during his sojourn in the woods.

In half an hour he sat astride Egypt, bound down the Pass. This trip would be a welcome respite,

and from every angle favorable for him. Two hours later he was climbing the benches into the black timber, and late that afternoon he halted with the boys in a wild and sylvan spot to make a permanent camp.

"Boys, your dad has stuck us with a job he thinks we can't do," observed Rock at the campfire. "Five hundred head of two-year-olds by August."

"Can't be did," replied Tom.

"By thunder! What's eatin' Dad these days?" exclaimed Harry.

"Let's fool him once," added Al, with spirit. "There's another dance in town along early in August. An' if you-all want a hunch—there's Somebody who says I gotta be on hand."

"That's the talk, Al," said Rock. "If we can find a canyon or draw somewhere close we'll drive what we round up each day, and fence them in."

"Good big draw over here. Water an' grass. Once been fenced in, but the poles are down. Reckon we could fix it up pronto."

Before they went to bed Rock had imbued the brothers with something of his own will to do or die. Next morning they were up in the dark, had the horses in at dawn, breakfast before sunrise, and on the drive when the first tinges of rose colored the rims of the Pass.

One night Al got in latest of all, weary and sullen. Rock knew something untoward had happened, but he waited until the lad had eaten and rested.

"What did you run up on today, cowboy?" queried Rock, at length.

"I was up under the Notch," replied Al, "an' first thing I seen a couple of riders high up, watchin' me. Reckon they never lost sight of me all day."

Three days later, miles east of the Notch, Rock's alert eye caught sight of riders above him on a slope, keeping behind the trees, and no doubt spying upon him with a glass. Though boiling with rage, he went right on driving as if he were none the wiser.

Then, a couple of days before the full 500 head had been herded into the canyon-corral, the thing Rock expected came to pass. Early in the morning, at breakfast hour, a group of riders, five in number, rode down upon the camp.

"Boys, reckon I don't like this," said Rock gruffly. "But you take it natural-like, and I'll do the talkin'."

As the riders entered camp Rock rose from his seat beside the campfire to greet the visitors. They were seasoned range-riders, a hard-looking quintet, not one of whom Rock had ever seen. They probably belonged to the Wyoming outfit which had come from the north with Hesbitt. It took no second

glance for Rock to decide they did not know him by sight or reputation.

"Howdy! Just in time for grub," he said heartily.

"Much obliged, but we had ourn," replied the leader, a bronzed, rugged cowman, with bright bold eyes that roved everywhere. "Gage Preston outfit?"

"Part of it," replied Rock, not so cordially.

"Roundup or drivin' a herd?" went on the interlocutor.

"We're drivin' five hundred head of two-year-olds down the Pass. Reckon another day or so will make the full count," rejoined Rock.

"Big job for so few punchers. Where you got the herd bunched?"

"We fenced a canyon across the creek," returned Rock, pointing eastward.

"Don't know the lay of the land," went on the leader. "Haven't rid long on this range."

"Shore you didn't have to tell me that," replied Rock bluntly. "You're from Wyomin', an ridin' for Hesbitt."

"How'd you know thet?"

"Reckon nobody else would brace *me* this way."

"*You?* Which one of the Prestons might you be? I've seen Ash Preston out on the range, an' you're shore not him."

"I might be any one of the other six Prestons," rejoined Rock with dry sarcasm, "Hadn't you better hand over your callin'-card before askin' me to introduce myself?"

"I'm Jim Dunne, foreman for Hesbitt," replied the rider.

"All right. How do, Mr. Dunne? A blind cowboy could see your call isn't friendly. Now what do you want?"

"Wal, we've come over to have a look at your herd," answered Dunne.

"Ahuh!" Rock strode halfway across the camp space to confront Dunne. "Just to see if by accident we didn't round up a couple of Half Moon steers? Dunne, you bet your life you're goin' to look over our herd. Then I'll call you plumb straight."

One of Dunne's men whispered to him, with visible effect.

"Say, are you this fellar Rock?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, I'm Rock. Reckon that doesn't mean anythin' to you. But maybe it will later."

"Wal, I can't see as there's any reason to be riled," returned Dunne, shifting in his saddle, evidently now wanting to conciliate Rock.

"That's because you don't know this range," said Rock curtly, and then turned to the Preston brothers. "Boys, we'll drive the steers out of the canyon for inspection. We'll head them down into the Pass.

Then we'll pack and go on in."

Rock relentlessly held the Half Moon outfit on both sides of the corral gate while the cowboys drove the steers out in single file and in twos and threes. It was Rock's task to head them down toward the Pass, which was easy after the leaders got started.

Dunne made several weak attempts to call off the inspection, but Rock rigorously held him and his men to a count of every steer that passed the gateway. It was a long, tedious job.

"Dunne, between you all you've seen every head of stock we've driven," said Rock, when he had dismounted to face the men. "You didn't see one Half Moon brand, did you?"

"Can't say I did."

"And you punchers? Neither did you?"

"No, Rock, we didn't," replied the one who had whispered to Dunne. "An' if we'd had our way this deal wouldn't hev come off."

"All right. Dunne, go for your gun!" commanded Rock.

"What!" ejaculated Dunne hoarsely, his face turning yellow.

"Can't you hear? Any man who thinks me a rustler has got to back it with his gun."

"Rock, I—I—we— Throwin' guns wasn't in my orders."

"Dunne, you don't fit on this range," replied Rock, in bitter scorn. "Keep out of my way hereafter." Then he turned to the other riders. "Reckon you're not willin' parties to this raw deal Dunne gave me. Any self-respectin' cowboy, if he calls another a rustler, knows it's true and is ready to fight. Tell Hesbitt exactly what happened here. If you don't I'll hold it against you. Tell him rotten gossip on the range isn't proof of an outfit's guilt."

"All right, Rock, we'll shore give Hesbitt the straight of this," replied the rider.

The four mounted men rode away, and Dunne made haste to get astride and follow.

On the third day following, early in the afternoon, Rock and his cowboys left the herd of steers in the meadowland below Slagle's ranch, and rode on home, a weary and silent four, scattered wide along the lane.

The labor of the past few weeks had been so strenuous and the application to it so zealous that Rock scarcely realized the lapse of time. What had happened at Sunset Pass during the interim? He hoped but little. What pleasure he might have had in driving the herd down to the Pass, ahead of schedule, had been spoiled by the advent of the Half Moon outfit and the necessity of revealing it to Preston.

Rock asked the brothers to keep

their mouths shut, but strict observance of their promises was not likely. Indeed, by the time he had shaved and changed his clothes, there came rapid footfalls, followed by a thump on his cabin door.

Rock slid back the bar, whereupon Preston stamped in, with Ash close behind him.

"Howdy, boss!" said Rock cheerfully, and nodded to Ash.

"Al busted in with a wild story," broke out Preston. "Said Hesbitt's outfit spied on you while you was drivin'? Then they rode into your camp. Five of them. Fellar named Dunne in charge. He was mean as a skunk an' said he'd look your herd over. But when you called him an' he found out who you was he tried to hedge. Al says you made him inspect every steer you had—an' after that dared him to throw a gun. Al was terrible excited. Darn fool blurted thet all out in front of the folks. Rock, was he just loco, or is he exaggeratin' a little run-in you had with one of Hesbitt's outfits?"

"Boss, Al told the truth, and put it mild at that," replied Rock, and turned to tie his scarf before the mirror. In the glass he saw Preston's eyes roll and fix with terrible accusation upon his son. "Sit down, both of you," went on Rock, and presently faced them again.

Ash was coolly rolling a cigarette, his face a mask. Preston had been drinking of late, but appeared sober, and now, though grim and angry, met Rock's glance steadily. "Wal, thet's short an' sweet," he said. "Rock, suppose you tell us everythin' thet come off."

Thus adjured, Rock began a minute narrative of the situation from the day Al caught the two riders spying upon him from the slope.

"Rock, suppose Dunne couldn't have been bluffed? What then?"

"I'd have bored him," answered Rock. "And I told Dunne to keep out of my way. If I meet him—"

"Wal, Rock," interposed Ash in a voice that made Rock's flesh creep, "I'll see to it I'll meet him first."

"Cowboy, I never expected you'd stand up fer me thet way," burst out Preston, genuinely moved. "Course I never knew you. It means more'n I can tell you, havin' my youngsters be with you then. I just can't thank you."

"Don't try," returned Rock, turning it off with an easy laugh.

Preston paced the room, gazing down at the bare rough-hewn floor. "Reckon this hyar deal wouldn't be particular bad fer me if it wasn't fer our butcherin' bizness," he remarked, as if thoughtfully to himself.

Rock, however, divined that was a calculating speech. "You hit it, Gage. There's the rub. My hunch

is you must quit the butcherin'," said Rock deliberately, his eye on Ash.

"I will, by thunder!" replied the rancher, wheeling instinctively to face his son.

Ash rose out of the cloud of smoke. At that moment, for Trueman Rock, nothing in the world could have been so desirable as to smash that face. Ash took no notice of his father's decision. He flipped his cigarette butt almost at Rock. "I'm butcherin' tomorrow, Mister Rock," he asserted.

"Butcher and be•darned!" retorted Rock, absolutely mimicking the other's tone.

"You're gettin' too thick out here," said Ash, backing to the door, which he opened. "I told you once to clear out. This's the second time. There won't never be no third." He backed out the door, his blue eyes like fire under ice, then stalked off the porch toward his cabin.

"Gage, that bullheaded son of yours will be the ruin of you," said Rock, turning to the rancher.

"Lord! don't I know it!" groaned Preston from under his huge hands.

Rock remained away from the supper table, though the second bell rang. He found in his pack enough to satisfy him. He did not feel hunger. It was a trying hour as he watched from his window.

Presently Rock saw Preston, accompanied by Thiry, come out of his cabin and cross over to enter Ash's. A light flashed from the window. Rock's first thought was to creep under that window and listen. But for risk to Thiry he would have done so; however, he decided to go down through the grove and come up between Ash's cabin and Thiry's, and wait for her.

It was quite dark when he slipped out. He stole among the trees, and making a half-circle he came up to the bench under Thiry's pine, and sat down there to wait, thrilling with anticipation of soon seeing her white form emerge from the blackness.

But an hour passed. She did not come. Another went by! The light burned in Ash's window, and now and then a dark form cast a shadow. The conference was still going on. Rock knew surely that Thiry had not left Ash's cabin; he had watched for that, all the time he had circled it.

The night threatened to be stormy. The stillness gave place to a moaning of the wind, and thunder rumbled nearer. Drops of rain pattered on Rock's bare head. The lightning flared brighter, showing the black mountains and the Pass leading to them.

All the lights except that one in Ash's cabin were now out. The hours passed, strangely full for Rock. The longer he waited, the

less impatience he felt. He had been drawn into the whirlpool of this Preston catastrophe, and he would stick it out, come what might. How the wind moaned overhead! It was like a knell. And the weird flashes of lightning along the battlements of the horizon fitted the melancholy sound.

It must have been long after midnight when Rock heard a door close. He waited, straining eyes and ears, beginning to wonder if he had been mistaken about not missing Thiry. He reassured himself. Another door closed, and that he was sure had come from Preston's cabin. How pitch black it was at a little distance! Then out of the blackness a slender vague shape glided, like a specter. The darkness was deceptive.

Rock let her get right upon him, so close he could have touched her, and his heart suddenly contracted violently. "Thiry! Thiry!" he whispered, unable to make his voice clear or steady.

He heard her gasp. Like a statue she stood. He had a poignant instant of remorse for succumbing to his selfish longing to see her. This would alienate her further. "Thiry! Don't be frightened. I waited. It's Trueman," he whispered.

"You!" she cried, and seemed to loom on him out of the shadows. Her arms swept wide and that extraordinary action paralyzed Rock. The next instant they closed 'round his neck.

Chapter Thirteen

Solution?

Rock stood stiff and immovable as the pine tree by his side, but his mind, his heart received the fact of that embrace with tumultuous violence.

Scarcely had Thiry clasped him when she uttered a cry and released the convulsive hold, her hands unlocking and sliding down from each shoulder as if bereft of strength. "Oh—I'm—beside myself!" she whispered.

Taking her hand, Rock led her to a seat on the bench under the pine, where she sank almost in collapse, her head bowed. Rock resisted his natural impulses—crushed down the exultation of the moment.

"Thiry, why did you—do that?"

"I—I don't know. What must you think of me?"

"Reckon I think all that's wonderful and beautiful. But I think also I'm entitled to an explanation."

"Trueman, how can I explain what I scarcely realize?" she said with pathos. "I'd been hours with Dad and Ash. Oh, it was sickening. We begged—we prayed Ash to give up—plans he has. He was a fiend. So was Dad. But I kept trying till

I was exhausted. It must be two o'clock. As I came across to my cabin I was thinking of how you met that Half Moon outfit. How you resented suspicion against Dad! I was wondering how I should thank you—tomorrow. Then you rose right out the black ground. What fright you gave me! And when you spoke I—I just—" She faltered and broke off leaving him to guess the rest.

Rock's compassion overcame his more powerful emotions. "Thiry, you've explained how upset you were—and why. But that would not make you fling your arms 'round my neck."

"I'm guilty," she replied distantly. "If you can't be understanding —generous—then take it how you will. After all, I belong to the Preston outfit."

These words, tinged with bitterness, accompanied by the withdrawal of her hand from his, gave Rock the cue. He grasped her arm, not gently, and pulled her down on the seat, this time closer to him, and he held her. "You stay here. Reckon I might remind you that Ash is not the only bad hombre on the range."

To judge from her shrinking, and the trembling of her arm, his speech both frightened and angered her. "Very well, if you detain me by force," Thiry said coldly. "Why were you waiting for me at this unheard-of hour?"

"I saw you go into Ash's cabin, and I thought I'd wait till you came out."

"Then you were spying on me—on us?"

"Reckon so, if you want to use hard words. But sure my strongest motive was just to see you, talk to you a minute."

"Well, since you've done that, please let me go."

"Thiry, you upset everythin' when you put your arms round my neck," he said.

"Don't harp on that," she flashed hotly. "I never did such a thing before. I—I couldn't to any other man. It just happened. If you want to spare me let me forget it."

"Reckon I'll never let you," rejoined Rock stubbornly. "I love you. Tell me what weighs so upon you. Tell me your secret."

"I—I have no secret."

"Don't you trust my love?"

"Oh, I would if I dared," she whispered.

Rock had wrenched that truth from her. Therein lay her weakness, the vulnerable spot upon which he must remorselessly make his attack. He would not stifle his conscience, but every moment he became more convinced that in order to save her he must play upon her weakness, force her to confession, betray his knowledge of her guilty sharing of Preston's secret.

"Thiry, you might dare anythin' on my love," he began.

"Oh no—no! If it were only myself!"

"Thiry, there are only two people in all the world—you and me."

"How silly, Trueman. You *are* selfish."

"Well, if it's selfish to love you, worship you, to want your burdens on my shoulders, to save you from trouble, disgrace—to make you happy—then indeed I am sure selfish."

Through her wrist, which he held, he felt the intermittent slight quiverings, then at the word "disgrace" a distinct shock. Hurriedly she rose, and all but released herself. "Do you speak of love and—and disgrace in one breath?" she queried.

"Yes. And you understand," he replied sharply. "Thiry darling, I can forgive your falsehood to all except me."

It did not take much of a pull to get her into his arms, and in another moment he had her helpless, lifting her from the ground, her face close under his.

"Thiry, don't you love me a very little?" he asked, deep tenderness thrilling in his voice.

"No! Oh, let me go!" she implored.

"Thiry, I love you so wonderfully. Ever since that minute you stepped in Winter's store. Didn't you like me then—or afterward?"

"I suppose I did. But what's the use to talk of it? You're holding me in a—a—most shameless manner. Let me go."

"Reckon I'll hold you this way a long time. Till you say you love me a little."

She essayed to free herself, but her strength fell far short of her spirit. "Oh—please—please! Trueman, this is outrageous!"

"It sure is. 'Most as outrageous as your deceivin' me."

"How have I deceived you?"

"For one thing—carin' about me a little. You do, don't you, Thiry?"

"Care about you? I suppose I—I did. But what's caring? It certainly doesn't give you license to hold me against my will."

"Well, I reckon that depends on what you mean by care. I'm arguin' you love me a little bit. But I must make sure. Reckon first off I'll kiss you a couple of thousand times and see if I can tell by that."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I, though? Sure I'm a reckless cowboy. Now watch me."

And with action at strange variance with his bantering words he bent to kiss her hair again and again and again, and then her ear, and last her cheek, that changed its coolness under his lips.

"There!" he whispered, and drew her head back on his shoulder. "Sure *they* were only worshipful

kisses—do you hate me for them?"

"I couldn't hate you. Please let that do. Let me go—before it's too—"

"It *is* too late, Thiry, for both of us," he whispered passionately, and he kissed her lips—and then again, with all the longing that consumed him.

"Now will you confess you love me—a little?" he asked huskily.

"O God help me—I do—I do!"

"More than a little? Thiry, I didn't expect much. Sure I don't deserve it—but tell me."

"Yes, more." And she twisted to hide her face, while her left arm slowly crept up his shoulder, and went half 'round his neck. "That's what was the matter with me."

"When did you know?" he asked, amazed in his incredulity.

"Just now. But I knew there was something wrong before."

"Thiry, bless you! If this's not a one-sided affair, kiss me."

"No—no—if I give up—we're ruined," she whispered tragically.

"Sure we're ruined if you don't. So let's have the kisses anyhow."

"Trueman, since I never can—marry you—I—I mustn't kiss you."

"Darling, one thing at a time. By and by we'll tackle the marryin' problem. I'd go loco if I thought you'd be my wife some day. But just now make this dream come true. I want your kisses, Thiry. I'll compromise. I'll be generous. Just one—but not like that fairy kiss you gave me on Winter's porch."

"Trueman, if I give *one*—it means all," she said tremulously.

Lifting her head he turned her face to his.

"You are wrong to—to master me this way," she said mournfully. "If you knew—you might not want it."

"Master nothin'! I am *your* slave. But kiss me. Settle it forever."

How slowly she lifted her pale face, with eyes like black stars! In the sweet fire of her lips Rock gained his heart's desire.

Then she lay in his arms, her face hidden, while he gazed out into the stormy night, across the black Pass to the dim flares along the battlements of the range. His victory brought happiness and sorrow commingled. But the precious form in his arms, the mortal flesh that embodied and treasured an infinitely more precious gift—her love—lifted his spirit and bade him go on.

"Now, Trueman, explain what you meant by my—falsehood to all?" she asked presently.

"Are you quite prepared?" he returned gravely. "Sure it's not easy to rush from joy to trouble."

She sat up, startled, with hands nervously releasing their hold.

"Thiry, you are keepin' Ash's and your father's secret from all."

"Trueman!" she cried, as if her own mind had deceived her ears.

"They are cattle thieves. Beef

thieves. So are your brothers Range, Scoot and Boots, along with them."

"O my God! You know!" she almost screamed, and slipped to her knees before him.

"Hush! Not so loud! You'll wake someone," he said sternly, placing a firm hand over her mouth. "Get up off your knees."

But she only leaned forward, clutching him, peering up into his face. "Trueman, how do—you know?"

"I suspected it when I first came. I found signs. Quicklime! That made me suspicious. Slagle's well is half full of hides. Sure those hides have not the Preston brand. Then over near where they butchered last I came on the same boot track that I'd seen down near the slaughterhouse. I trailed that track. It led under a culvert. There I found hundreds of hides, tied up in burlap sacks. I opened one. That hide had a Half Moon brand! Down here at your barn, one day after the dance, I measured Ash's boot track. It was the same as that one I'd trailed. But for real proof, I heard your Dad and Ash talkin' together. They gave it all away."

"I knew—it would come. It will —kill me," she wailed brokenly. "Oh, to make love to me—while you were spying on my brother—my father!"

"Little girl, I told you to speak low. Reckon it does look pretty bad to you. But it's not so bad as it looks—so far as I'm concerned. But, Thiry, you're in this secret and you would be held guilty in some degree in court, if your part in it was found out. And let me tell you Ash would hold no secret. And there's the danger for you."

"Court! Danger? You mean they'll be arrested—and I will be dragged in with them?"

"Reckon that is liable to happen," he replied, wanting to impress upon her once and for all the peril of the situation.

"You'd betray us!" Swift as a striking snake her hand darted out and snatched his gun as it rested against his thigh. Leaning back, she extended it with both hands. "I'll kill you!"

"Thiry, if you believe I could betray you or them—shoot!" he replied swiftly.

"You will not tell?" she flashed.

"Never. You sure got me wrong."

She gave vent to a shuddering sound. The gun fell from her hands. She swayed. He could see her eyes were tight shut. Then she sank forward, her face on his knees, and clinging to him she broke into low sobs, every one of which was like a knife-thrust to Rock.

He let her have it out, and stroked her hair. She did not recover soon, though presently the sobs gave way to soft weeping. Then he held her closer, scarcely seeing

her or the black pine-streaked gloom, or the stretching flares of yellow light along the horizon. He was seeing something blacker than the night, more sinister than the shadows.

As a last resource, to save her and her father, he could kill Ash Preston. But for Ash, this blundering, thieving work could be halted in time to prevent discovery. Preston already saw the error of his ways. He could be amenable to any plan. Ash was the stumbling-block.

At this brooding juncture of Rock's meditations he became aware that Thiry was stirring. She rose from her knees, while still clinging to him, and she sank beside him on the bench, to lean against him, face uplifted. "Can you forgive me?" she whispered. "I was out of my head. I should have known you would never betray us. Everything went but a hot terrible fury. Oh, Trueman, I am a Preston."

"Well, I reckon I don't want you anybody else."

"Can *anything* be done to save us?"

"It must be done, Thiry. Sure I don't know what. My mind's not workin' any better than yours."

"I dare not breathe a word of this. They would kill you."

"Never give Ash a hunch that I know. Don't tell your father anythin'. There's no great hurry. We've got time. I'll find some way."

"Oh, Trueman, you are my one hope. To think I've tried to drive you away! That I nearly shot you! How little I know myself. But I do know this—if you stop this selling of stolen beef—if you prevent it before they're arrested—I'll—I'll love you with all my heart and soul."

"Darling, I will do it somehow."

"I'll go now," she said, rising and swaying unsteadily.

He lifted her in his arms and walked toward her cabin. At the door of the cabin he set her gently upon her feet. She still held him with one clinging hand, and that unconscious act was balm to Rock's distracted heart.

"I'm glad now you came to Sunset Pass," she whispered. "But you've added to my fears. It's now you, too, who might fall under the Preston shadow."

"Did you read my letter—that I slipped under your door before I left?"

"It is here," she said, touching her breast.

"Read it again. Be brave, Thiry. Don't give up. Never lose faith in me. Good night," he concluded, and loosing her hand he kissed it, and fled silently into the darkness.

Forty-eight hours later Rock rode into Wagontongue the old True Rock of earlier and wilder range days. Yet no day of his life

had ever seen the passion, the will to invent and achieve, that one single moment now embodied.

When Rock dropped in to see Winter it was not with any definite purpose; but that night he and his old friend locked themselves in a room at the hotel. There were range channels open to Winter to which Rock had no access. The Preston situation was graver—actual accusations had been made, it seemed, but by whom was not manifest. Winter talked while Rock listened. It did not take long to impart information that was endless in its possibilities.

"Sol, old-timer, I'm in deep," said Rock, at the conclusion of Winter's confidence, and he opened his palms expressively. "Thiry loves me!"

"Shore," replied Winter, sagely wagging his head. "But you wouldn't take her an' leave the country?"

"Reckon I couldn't think of that yet."

"Do you know anythin' thet makes Preston's guilt shore?"

"Yes, but I promised Thiry not to tell it."

"But you can go to Preston an' tell *him* you know. Scare him to sense."

"Yes, I can. More—I know I can stop him."

"Good. That seems a solution. It's not too late. Go back pronto."

"Sol, Gage Preston can't call his soul his own. I reckon Ash led him into this, and nothin' on earth or in heaven can stop Ash Preston."

"Nothin'?" echoed Winter.

"Nothin' but lead!"

"Ahuh! Wal, I never yet seen thet kind of a hombre miss meetin' it. Leave him out. Now, Rock, I've an idee. If Dabb an' Lincoln know what I know, they will *tell* you. Thet obviates any broken promise on your part. An' they rule the

Cattle Association. Hesbitt is only president. What Dabb an' Lincoln say is law. Now you go to them."

"But, Sol, good heavens! What for?" queried Rock impatiently.

"Son, you are so deep in love thet you ain't practical. If you can get Dabb and Lincoln to sympathize with you an' Thiry, thet'll be sympathizin' with Preston. Ten years ago there was a case somethin' like this. Wal, his friends got him to make good what he'd stole, an' saved him from jail, if no worse. I've grown gray here. I've been raised with these ranchers. I know them. If you've got the nerve an' the wit you can keep Preston from ruin an' Thiry from a broken heart."

Rock leaped up, inspired, suddenly on fire with the vision Winter's sagacity had conjured up. He pushed aside table and chair, and hugged his startled friend. "Oldtimer, I've sure got the nerve and you've supplied the wit."

Rock presented himself at Dabb's office the next morning.

"Hello, Rock! You sure look rocky," replied Dabb, in answer to his greeting. "Hope you haven't been drunk."

"No. Only worried."

"Too bad. Have a chair and a cigar. What's the trouble, Rock? Things goin' bad out there?"

"They've gone from bad to worse. John, I told you I was in love with Thiry. Well, *that* wasn't so bad. But now she's in love with me."

"Man, you've only yourself to blame. You were advised not to go. I myself told you not to stay."

"I loved the girl," replied Rock simply.

"Humph!" said Dabb, chewing at his cigar. "You fell in love with Thiry before you went out there?"

"Of course. Otherwise do you suppose I'd have gone?"

"Probably not. Well, that puts another light on it. Rock, are you goin' to stick out there? And go under with Preston?"

"Reckon I must—*if* he goes under."

"Naturally you have your hopes. Rock, some of us cattlemen know you haven't looked for anythin' shady about Preston."

"How do you know?"

"Well, that question came up the other night at our Association meeting. Hesbitt gave you a hard rub. Over this Preston scandal. Tom Lincoln an' I an' one or two others took exception to Hesbitt. We claimed you not only weren't in with Preston on anythin' crooked, but you hadn't trailed around lookin' for it. The reason, of course, was you were sweet on Thiry Preston."

"John, that was dámned good of you," returned Rock warmly. "You an' Lincoln figured that if I had

looked for shady work I'd have found it?"

"Sure. We knew that. No outfit could fool you."

"Well, what then?"

"Not so easy. But personally I believe you'd have come to me for advice an' help. Now, tell me what's worryin' you, Rock?"

"Hesbitt's outfits are after Preston," replied Rock, and he gave Dabb a detailed account of Dunne's manœuver at the Notch camp, and what had come of it.

"Rock, that was a bold move an' a wise one. Reckon it was the only way any honest range-rider could meet such a raw deal. But suppose you meet this Dunne again, in more favorable circumstances for him, an' he shows fight?"

"I'd hate it, but I'll sure go through with my call. No cowman can insult me like that. He'll either crawl again, as he did then, or shoot."

"Rock, I'm darn glad you told me this. Reckon it didn't seem important to you—but it is important."

"How so?" asked Rock.

"Well, in the first place it vindicates Lincoln an' me in our stand for you. An' it will stump Hesbitt."

"Ahuh! Then this new rancher is dead set against Preston?"

"Is he? Well, I guess! An' he has hit outfits r'arin'. Rock, the strange thing is, Hesbitt has been losin' a good deal of stock—most Half Moon brand—an' his men can't locate them. Hide nor hair! But other men have!"

"Dabb, what're you tellin' me?"

"Don't yell, cowboy. Walls have ears," admonished Dabb. "Rock, now listen. You once rode for Jess Slagle. You know him. Preston ruined Slagle. An' Slagle has hung around out there to get even. Reckon he's in a fair way to do it. For he has tracked the Prestons down. But he wants to get his money back, or some of it. Sure he knows if he threatens Preston with exposure he'll only get shot for his pains. So he came to me."

"Aw, this's awful!" groaned Rock. "Jess Slagle. An' he has tracked Preston down? What to, John?"

"Fresh Half Moon hides hidden close to where Preston last butchered. He can show these any time. I called Tom Lincoln in to talk it over. We advised Slagle to keep mum an' wait."

"What was the idea in that?"

"Well, we're all ranchers, you know," replied Dabb meditatively, as if the query had before presented itself to him. "In a little way, more or less, we've all appropriated cattle not our own. Reckon we hate to make a move. The stolen cattle were not ours, you see. It'll mean a fight. An' we've passed the buck to Hesbitt."

"No, John, by heaven! you've passed it to me," returned Rock, with passion.

"Now, Rock, you don't want to take this deal on your shoulders," protested Dabb.

"Would you? I put it up to you straight," demanded Rock eloquently. "Suppose you loved Thiry. Suppose she loved you, and you'd found out what a sweet girl she is —that if her father went to jail it'd break her heart—or kill her. Now what would you do?"

"Rock, I'm damned if I know," replied Dabb, red in the face, and he slammed his unsmoked cigar to the floor. "It's a cropper. An' I hate to be beaten by anythin' in the cattle line."

"Dabb, here's what I'll do, and I'm sure thankin' you for the hunch. I'll buy Slagle's silence. I've five thousand dollars in the bank. I'll stop Gage Preston's stealin' before it's too late. And if I have to, I'll call Ash Preston out!"

"No! No!" exclaimed Dabb violently. "Not that last, anyway. Rock, will you never settle down to peaceful ranchin'? You might be a credit to this range. And you'd lose the girl and ruin her happiness, sure."

"Well, it might be the only way out," returned Rock.

"Suppose you come to my house for dinner tonight. I'll have Tom Lincoln. We'll talk it over."

It was dusk when Rock walked out to the mansion that was John Dabb's home, and was admitted to a cheerful library and the presence of Dabb and Lincoln.

"Howdy, Rock!" was Dabb's greeting. "Glad you came early. Tom, you remember True Rock, don't you?"

Lincoln was a little gray withered cattleman, bright of eye, lean of face, not apparently a day older than when Rock had last seen him. He looked like a Texas Ranger, and had been one in his day.

"I shore do," replied Lincoln, extending a lean hand. "Howdy, Rock!"

"Sit down, friends, an' smoke while I talk," said Dabb. "Now, Rock, I've talked your trouble over with Tom, an' here's his angle. I'm bound to say I think it a solution to a nasty problem. At that it hinges most on you. Go back to Preston an' tell him the truth. That he's found out by some cattlemen, an' he must quit his butcherin' stolen cattle before Hesbitt gets on to him.

"Tell him he's to come before the Cattle Association. We'll keep the deal out of court an' Preston out of jail, provided he pays Slagle off, an' squares Hesbitt for the stock he has lost. Then Preston an' his four sons, especially this Ash Preston, who's the ringleader, no doubt, must leave the country."

"Wonderful fair and fine of you gentlemen," returned Rock instantly, his set face breaking. "Reckon I couldn't find words to thank you. I won't try."

"Wal, Rock, it's aboot this heah way," put in Lincoln, with his slow Southern accent. "We don't want the range slandered by such a raw case. Who'd ever think the Prestons would stoop to that? Mrs. Preston is a nice woman and the girls are ladies. Shore they cain't be in on the secret. We'd like to keep Preston out of jail for their sake."

"All right, Rock. What do you say?" queried Dabb. "Will you settle it?"

"Yes, with one reservation," replied Rock grimly.

"An' what's that?"

"I can manage Preston. But when Ash finds out, he'll fight. He can't be persuaded and he can't be frightened."

"Shore. An' your reservation is you'll have to kill him," interposed the imperturbable Texan as he flicked the ashes off his cigar, his bright eyes on Rock.

Rock did not make any reply.

"Darn tough on the girl. My wife says she loves this particular brother," added Dabb regretfully.

"Reckon it's tougher on Rock, but *quien sabe?* You shore cain't ever tell aboot a woman," rejoined Lincoln.

Chapter Fourteen

Showdown

Before sundown of another day Rock reined his sweating horse in front of Slagle's cabin, and dismounted to approach that individual, who had come to the door.

"Slagle, I want to talk Dutch to you," said Rock. "Dabb told me you'd come to him with proof of Preston's guilt."

"The devil he did!"

"Yes, and my business with you is to buy your silence."

Slagle showed further amazement and interest. He listened intensely to Rock's story. "Say, cowboy, air you makin' this offer on your own hook?" he queried.

"Sure. I told only Sol Winter, who had my money banked."

"What on earth fer? Rock, excuse me, but it looks darn queer."

"Jess, I'm honest. I'm not in on the Preston steal, and you sure know that. I'm tryin' to stall the thing off. Now I figure you as pretty sore, and I don't blame you. What'll you take to keep mum?"

"Rock, this hyar don't set right on me. Lord knows I need money, but I ain't so low down I'd take a cowboy's savin's. What's your idee? You shore can't care thet much about Preston."

"Jess, you're wastin' my time. I love Thiry Preston and I'm goin' to save her dad because of that."

"I savvy. Shore call it decent of you. Makes me want to act square with you. An' the fact is, Rock, I couldn't prove anythin' on Preston now. The Half Moon hides have been moved from where I found them."

"Well, no matter. You did find them, and your word would convince ranchers, if not a court. My offer stands. What'll you take?"

"Rock, hev you got backin'?"

"No. I've my own money. Cash! Five thousand."

"Wal, I hate to take you up, Rock, an' I wouldn't if I didn't feel shore you'll get it back, or some, anyhow. Say I take half of what you got—twenty-five hundred. Preston will have to pay you. An', Rock, I'll pack an' rustle out of hyar pronto."

"That's fine, and better. It may be a long time till somebody else gets proof on Preston. And it's time I'm gamblin' on. Here's your money, Jess. I'm askin' two promises. Keep Preston's secret, and don't get drunk before you leave."

"Reckon thet's easy. Rock, I'm much obliged to you. I've got another chance in life."

"I hope you'll be successful," returned Rock, stepping over to his horse and mounting.

Slagle followed him, and laid a red-haired hand on Rock's chaps. His eyes held a prophetic light. "Rock, I'd be willin' to bet all this hyar money, five to one, thet if you save Gage Preston, you'll hev to kill Ash."

Spurring Egypt sharply, Rock swore lustily at the vindictive homesteader and galloped away.

Though Rock put the white horse to a finish that concluded a wonderful day's travel, it was well after dark when they reached the Pass. Lights were burning in all the Preston cabins. At the barn Rock encountered one of the Mexican lads, and turned Egypt over to him. With that he stalked back through the grove. Peering into the kitchen door, he espied Mrs. Preston and Alice and Lucy at their evening chores.

"Howdy, folks! Is it too late for a bite and a cup of coffee? I've had nothin' since yesterday. Starved isn't the word!"

"Why, Mr. Rock, you sure look it," replied Alice gayly.

"Cowboy, it's never too late in this chuck-house," returned Mrs. Preston. "Come in and sit down."

Heavy boot thuds out on the porch attested to the approach of men. Rock certainly did not keep his back to the door.

"Who come in, Ma?" queried Preston, outside.

"A poor starved cowpuncher," replied his wife.

"Dad, it's only Mr. Rock," added Alice quickly.

Outside someone violently slap-

ped what sounded like a pair of gloves on the table.

"Pa, didn't I tell ye?" growled Ash Preston's unmistakable voice. "Thet hombre can't keep away from Thiry!"

Footfalls, sharp and quick, rang off the porch to thud on the ground. Then Preston's dragging steps approached. The doorway framed his burly form.

"Howdy, boss!" greeted Rock.

"Back so soon? Reckoned you'd stay out your leave," replied the rancher, with gloomy penetrating gaze on Rock.

"I rustled back," said Rock meaningly.

"Bad news?"

"Reckon all I got is good."

"Ahuh. Wal, come in, soon as you want to," concluded Preston.

Alice and her mother set before Rock a bounteous meal and while he gave ample evidence of appreciating it, they asked questions about the town. Rock imparted all the information he could muster.

"Oh, yes, I near forgot," he added presently, with a wink at Alice. "Yesterday I run into your beau, Charlie. He shore pumped me about you."

"My beau! Trueman Rock, I—I— He's not that," exclaimed Alice, blushing furiously. The mother's quick look was not lost on Rock.

"Excuse me, Allie. I just naturally thought he was, from the way he talked. Sure does need two to make a beau, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Preston had occasion to go out the back door.

"You wretch!" whispered Alice. "Mother thinks I'm too young. And I'm crazy to go to that next dance."

"I'm sure stupid, Allie. Lucky boy! Heigho! I wish I could go."

"Can't we all, Trueman? Thiry spoke of it today." Alice bent close to Rock's ear. "She's crazy about you."

"Allie—*you* wretch! It can't be true."

"It is so. I accused her of being."

Rock leaned closer to the tempting lips, as if they were dispensing music. "Well?"

"Thiry denied it. But she got red as fire—then mad."

The entrance of Mrs. Preston put an end to this whispered exchange. Soon afterward Rock strode out to seek Preston. On the porch he halted, and gazing out at the spectral pines and up at the blinking stars, and across toward Thiry's bright window, he called on all the passion and wisdom that might come through hope and prayer. The moment he confronted Preston the climax of this situation would have been set in motion.

"Rock, you didn't break any laigs gettin' hyar with thet good news," growled Preston as Rock entered.

"Reckon you won't be r'arin' for

me to hurry, after I start," replied Rock, closing the door and facing the rancher. "Preston, not a whisper of what I say must be heard by anyone but you."

"Come close then, an' talk low."

Whereupon Rock drew a chair up to Preston's, and eying him squarely, whispered, "Preston, the jig's up!"

"What you mean?" hoarsely rejoined the rancher.

"You're found out."

"What's found out?"

"Your butcherin' stolen cattle. Slagle found Half Moon hides under that culvert above his place. He told John Dabb. Dabb told Tom Lincoln. Then me."

"My Gawd!" Preston covered his face with nerveless hands.

Rock's first thrill came with the rancher's reception of this news. It augured well. But he let the revelation sink deep. He waited.

At length Preston lifted his haggard countenance. "How can Slagle prove thet—on me?"

"He can't. The hides were there, and now they've been moved."

"Ahuh. Wal, then, I'll deny everythin' an fight them."

"Gage, *I* can prove you guilty," whispered Rock.

"You can? How?"

"Ash's tracks. I trailed them. I measured them. I got his boot track here in the corral. I saw that same track leadin' down to the culvert and under it. I compared them. I ripped open one of those burlap sacks. The Half Moon brand!"

The big hands clenched, and opened wide. "Rock, you wouldn't ruin me?"

"No."

"An' you shore couldn't break Thiry's heart?"

"Do you need to ask?"

"Does anyone else have the proofs on me—like you?"

"No, not yet. But I'm not the only trailer on this range. Somebody will trail your sons, as I did Ash. *If you don't stop them!*"

"Does anybody else suspect—beside the four you named?"

"Hesbitt's outfits are scourin' the range. They suspect. But they don't know. Reckon sooner or later they'll hit on somethin'. Old sign. It might not convict, but it'd ruin you just the same. And any fresh sign—Preston, you'll all go to jail!"

"Rock, are you comin' in with me—an' Ash—an' Thiry?" asked Preston.

"I'm in with you and Thiry now. Not Ash. But clean and honest, Preston. I've laid my cards before Dabb and Lincoln. They know me I couldn't be crooked now—not to save your life and Thiry's happiness."

"Ahuh! What's the deal?"

"Listen," whispered Rock, bursting with his message. "I've shut

Slagle's mouth. I've bought his silence. He's leavin' the range."

"Lord Almighty! How'd you do it? What'd you give him?"

"Twenty-five hundred dollars."

Preston whistled low. "Of all the fellars I ever seen, you— Rock, I'm goin' to square thet with you."

"Sure you are. You're goin' to square it *all*. Listen. Come to town with me. I've got it all fixed. Dabb will call a meetin' of the Cattle Association council. That means him, Lincoln, and Hesbitt. To keep this out of court you will agree to pay Hesbitt for his Half Moon stock. Dabb and Lincoln have promised me they'll handle Hesbitt. It will all be done in secret. Then you and your sons who were in this deal must leave the country. We all believe Ash roped you into this butcherin' stolen cattle."

"He shore did. He was killin' stolen steers long before I ever knew. Then it was too late to stop him. An' I drifted in myself. All so easy! Only a few head of stock at a time! Nobody could ever guess! An' now—Rock, I'd almost as lief croak as face thet council. They might let me off, but they'd tell. It'd leak out."

"Preston, you're not thinkin' clear. You don't see this right. Straight out you've fallen to worse than rustlin'. If you don't take this chance, for the sake of your womenfolk, you'll ruin them. And you'll be as bad as Ash. You're no fool. I'd say, if it weren't for your wife and daughters, you should *quit* this crooked work and fight the whole range. If you met up with a bullet, well and good. But you're not alone. You've got a wife to think of—daughters, innocent boys. By heaven, Preston, I can't let you ruin Thiry!"

"Wal, I'll think your idee over good and hard, Rock. My not acceptin' it pronto doesn't mean I don't appreciate your wonderful offer an' all thet prompts you. I shore do. It may be the best way to save them. But the wife—Thiry, Allie, Lucy—they'd have to know, an' I'd almost shore rather die in my boots than tell them."

"Man, we don't have to tell. No one but Thiry will ever know."

"All right. Thet's much in its favor. I'll think it over. Meanwhile, I'll stop Ash if I have to hawg-tie him. An' you better take the boys an' go off in the woods somewhere. They deserve a vacation. But no goin' in to town. Take them huntin'. It's most turkey season. An' let me know where you go."

Well as Trueman Rock knew that country, it was his fortune to be taken by the Preston boys to high hunting-grounds which he had never visited or heard spoken of on the range.

It was up in the mountains back of the Pass, about a day's climb on

horseback, 8000 feet above the low country. Up there early fall had set in and the foliage was one gorgeous array of color. The camp, which was where they threw their bedrolls and built their fire, lay in a mountain meadow, at the edge of a magnificent grove of quaking aspens. Behind on a gentler slope stood scattered silver spruces and yellow pines, growing larger as they climbed, until on the ridge above they massed in the deep timber line, which like a green-black belt circled the mountain under the gray, grisly, weathered and splintered peaks.

Rock fell in love with this place more than any in which he had ever dropped a saddle. How he needed the beauty, the color, the solitude! He had come up there on the ragged edge of utter desperation. But scarcely were the boys out of sight and the horses grazing along the green-bordered brown stream, still and deep, when Rock began to feel something at work on his restless, seeking mind.

The days passed until Rock had no idea how long he had been absent from the Pass. Nearly a fortnight, he guessed. Then came Indian summer, that enchanting brief period of smoky, warm, still days, and floating amber and purple haze in the air.

Al Preston left to go down home for supplies. This threw Rock into a fever of uncertainty. What news would he fetch back? What message from Preston? Would Thiry write? The day was long, the night interminable, the second day unbearable. Rock wandered in the open forest across from camp, wanting always to be in sight of the trail that came up from below. Mid-afternoon ought to see Al ride in. That would allow ample time for the slow pack-horse. He sat on a pine log in the open forest above the oak grove. The smoky haze, the purple veils, the warm, swimming air, so full of fragrance and dreamy languor, the riotous mosaic of autumn colors, the melancholy birds, the dim sun still high and red above the slope of the mountain—these held Rock in strong grip, making it possible for him to wait.

Then a gray-laden pack-horse emerged from the green wall across the meadow. Rock suffered both thrill and pang. Next came a dark horse holding a slight rider that could not be Al Preston. Who could it be? Not the youngest Preston lad. Perhaps it was some boy Al had brought or sent. For Al was not in sight. Another pack-horse cleft the dark green gap where the trail emerged. And after it Al on his big bay. The foremost rider waved to the boys in camp. How they yelled! Rock watched with eyes starting. What was there strangely familiar

about that rider? Yet he knew he had never seen him before. Rock never forgot a mounted rider. Suddenly he leaped up madly. Thiry!

He ran. He leaped the brook. He made the camp in bounds.

"Howdy, Trueman!" Her smile was strained and she scarcely met his eager gaze. He had never seen her in rider's garb. Could that make such difference? She wore a tan blouse, with blue scarf, fringed gauntlets, overalls, and high boots. She looked like a boy until she dismounted. Rock had a wild desire to snatch her in his arms.

"Boys, throw my pack and unroll my bed," she said. And while the boys obeyed with alacrity she led the stunned Rock away from camp, under the golden aspens, into the forest.

"Glad to see me?" she asked, looking ahead at the windfalls and the splashes of brilliant hues.

"Glad!" he echoed, as if words were inadequate.

"You don't show it."

"Thiry! I'm loco."

She still held his hand, that she had taken openly before her brothers. Rock could not shake off his trance. Still, it did not seem the Thiry he knew. She halted beside a great fallen spruce with rugged seamed bark. "Lift me up," she said. And when he had complied she held him with strange hands, and looked into his eyes as she had never before.

A black squirrel squalled from a silver spruce that towered over them. All around the forest inclosed them, standing and fallen timber, sapling pines and sturdy junipers, patches of aspen, white-stemmed with dead-gold foliage, quaking as with a tremor of their roots. The thick tang of pine filled the air.

"Kiss me," this unknown Thiry said, not shyly, nor yet boldly, but somehow unnaturally for her. When Rock obeyed, restraining himself, in his bewilderment, she put her arms around him and her face against his neck. "Bad news, Trueman dear," she said, as if forced.

"Sure I could have guessed it. But it's welcome, since it fetched you."

"Ash made a killing of Half Moon steers and shipped the beef from Wagontongue," went on Thiry, talking by rote.

Rock's frame jerked with the hot gush of blood through his veins, but he did not voice his anger and dismay. And he remained mute. Her monotone, the absence of any feeling, the abnormal something about her, fortified him to hear catastrophe which would dwarf what she had already told.

"Dad wants you to come in with us—share our fortunes, our troubles—our sins—help us fight these ene-

my outfits. If we—"

"We?" he interrupted, in bitter heat.

"Yes, we. Ash and Dad and I—and my three brothers—and *you.*"

"I! And what do *I* get for spillin' blood for thieves? Ah, that is Preston's game. He wants me to kill—to spread terror among those Wyomin' outfits. And my reward will be—"

"Me," she said, without emotion.

"With Ash Preston's consent?" demanded Rock, angered to probe to the depths of this proposition.

"Dad claims when you become one of us—Ash will have to consent."

"Thiry Preston! You ask me to do this thing? You ask me to be a thief—a killer—to save your rotten brother, your weak and crooked father?"

"I—ask—you."

Almost with brutal force, Rock shook her, as if to awaken her out of a torpor. "No! No, you poor driven girl!" he cried. "I would die for *you,* but I'll never let you ruin your soul by such dishonor. They have blinded you—preyed on your love. Your brother is mad. Your father desperate. They would sacrifice you. Ash would agree to this, meanin' to shoot me in the back. No, Thiry!"

"You—will not?" she sobbed.

"Never. Not even to have you."

Suddenly then he had a wild weeping creature in his arms, whose cries were incoherent, whose beating hands and shaking body wrought havoc to the iron of his mood. "Oh, thank God—you won't!" she wept, lifting streaming eyes and working face. "I prayed you'd—refuse. I told Dad you'd never, never do it. I told Ash he lied—he'd never let you have me. But they made me—they drove me—all night they nagged me—until I gave in. Trueman darling, say you forgive. I was weak. I loved him so—and I'm almost broken. But you lift me from the depths. I love you more—a thousand times. Let come what will. I can face it now."

Hours later Rock kept vigil over a sleeping camp, where near him lay Thiry, in deep slumber, her fair sweet face, sad in repose, upturned to the watching stars. Beyond, her brothers were stretched in a row, likewise with dark faces still and calm in the starlight.

Rock's heart was full to aching. The night was exquisite, clear and cold, with blue velvet sky lighted by trains of stars, white sparks of fire across the zenith. He had forgotten the prayers of his youth, yet it was certain that he prayed. There seemed infinite strength in the grand dark mountain above, and a mystery all about him, in the ceaseless voice of dying insects, in the murmur of wild nature.

In the rose light of dawn, while the Preston boys whistled and shouted at the camp tasks, Rock and Thiry again wandered under the silver spruces, the golden aspens, the scarlet maples, back to that bit of primal forestland.

"Don't go back to the Pass," Thiry was pleading.

"I must. I'll go alone."

"But I'm afraid. If you meet him— Oh—you will! Trueman, I couldn't hate you. Once I thought I might. Oh, don't go!" She wound her arms around his neck and clung to him with all her might.

"Take me away—far away across the mountains," she begged, her lips parting from his to implore mercy, and then seeking them again. "It's the only way. I am yours, body and soul. I ask nothing more of life but that you spare him —and take me. The boys will let us have a pack. We can cross the mountains. It is not yet winter. Then somewhere we two will live for each other. I will forget him and all this horror. And you—will never—kill another man."

"Thiry girl, hush; you are breakin' me," he cried, spent with the might of agonized will that denied her kisses, her clinging arms. "That would be the worst for us both. It would brand me with their guilt and drag you down. No. I shall go alone—make one last stand to save your father."

Rock rode the zigzag descending trail down to the Pass in four hours —another splendid performance of the sure-footed, tireless horse.

There did not appear to be any untoward condition at the ranch that obviously affected the womenfolk. Preston had ridden off early that morning to a general roundup out on the range, at a place called Clay Hill. Ash Preston and his three brothers were off somewhere, probably also at the roundup, on their return from Wagontongue. No, they had not driven the beef wagons to town this time.

"Reckon I'll ride over to Clay Hill," muttered Rock.

Clay Hill was a famous old roundup ground. The gray bare knob of clay rising over a grassy level had given it a name. There were several cabins near the springs that gushed from the base of the hill.

Rock's keen eye snapped at the old-time scene. Dust and color and action! Herds of cattle, fields of horses! Not until he rounded the southern corner of Clay Hill, where the trail ran, and came abruptly upon the first cabin, horses, wagons, men, did he grasp that something was amiss. What could check a general roundup in the middle of the afternoon? No cowboys on guard! No cutting or branding! No movement, except a gradual straggling of the herds!

The men he saw were in groups, and their postures were not expressive of the lazy, lounging, careless leisure attendant upon meal hours or cessation of work.

Rock had permitted himself no anticipations. But now he divined the hour he had long dreaded; and he spurred his horse and rode down upon the men, scattering dust and gravel all over them.

He was off, throwing bridle, gloves, and in two swift jerks he got out of his chaps. "What's up?" he demanded of the six or eight cowmen who backed away. In the first sweeping glance he did not recognize one of them.

"Fight busted the roundup," replied a lean-jawed rider, whose face showed drops of sweat and pale freckles.

"Jimmy Dunne shot," replied an older man warily, his narrow slits of eyes shifting all over Rock.

"Who did it?"

"Ash Preston."

"Where is Dunne?"

"Layin' in the cabin thar."

Rock brushed the men aside. "Get out of my way," he ordered sharply, and forcing entrance to the cabin, he surveyed the interior. A line of dusty, sweaty cowboys fell back, to disclose a man lying on the floor, with another kneeling in attendance. A pan full of bloody water, the odor of rum! Rock saw a face of deathly pallor, clammy and leaden, and eyes black with pain. He stepped in and knelt, to take up Dunne's inert wrist and feel for his pulse.

At that the other man looked up quickly. It was Clink Peeples. "Howdy, Rock! I don't know, but I'm afeared Jim is—still I'm no good hand at judgin' bullet holes."

"Let me see."

The angry wound was situated high up on the left side, and it was bleeding freely, though not dangerously. Rock, calculating grimly, saw that Preston had missed the heart by several inches. The bullet had no doubt nicked the lung. But there was no sign of internal hemorrhage.

"Has he been spittin' blood?"

"No, I reckon he hasn't. I shore looked for thet," answered Peeples.

"Did the bullet come out?"

"It went clean through, clean as a whistle."

"Good!" exclaimed Rock, with satisfaction. "Dunne, can you hear me?"

"Why, sure," replied Dunne, faintly. A bloody froth showed on his lips. "Rock, reckon Preston—beat you—to this job."

"Reckon I'd never have done it. Listen, Dunne. This is a bad gunshot, but not necessarily fatal. If you do what you're told you'll live."

"You—think so, Rock? I've got—a wife—an' kid."

"I know it," returned Rock

forcefully. "Understand? I know."

"Rock, thet's shore—good news," panted Peeples, wiping his face. "I was plumb scared. Tell us what to do."

"Make a bed for him here," replied Rock, rising. "But don't move him till he's bandaged tight. Then awful careful. Make him lie quiet. Heat water boilin' hot. Put salt in it. Wash your hands clean. Get clean bandages. A clean shirt if there's nothin' else. Fold a pad and wet it. Bind it tight. Then send to town for a doctor."

"Thet's tellin' us," returned Peeples gratefully. "Frank, you heard. Rustle some boys now."

"Peeples, was it an even break?" inquired Rock coolly.

"Wal, I'm bound to admit it was. So we've nothin' on Preston thet way."

"What was it about?"

Dunne spoke up for himself in stronger voice: "Rock, I had the—proofs on him—much as I didn't—have on you."

"Ahuh! Don't talk any more, Dunne," replied Rock, and turned to Peeples. "Did he accuse Ash?"

"He shore did. Braced him soon as he got here with his outfit. I didn't see the fight. But thar's a dozen fellars who did. You talk to them."

"Where are the Prestons?" asked Rock, stalking out.

"Over at the third cabin," replied someone. "Ash is stalkin' to an' fro over thar, like a hyena behind bars."

Rock elbowed his way out of the crowd. Soon his glance fell upon those he sought, and in him surged the instinct of the lion that hated the hyena. Ash Preston stalked to and fro, away from the cabin, and when he faced back toward the watching men he appeared to do it sidewise. Two of his tall brothers sat together, backs to the cabin wall. A third, probably Range Preston, stood in the doorway, smoking a cigarette. Apart from them sat Gage Preston, his burly form sagging, his bare head bowed. His sombrero lay on the ground. Rock's impression was that Gage awaited only the sheriff.

Long ago Rock's mind had been made up and set. He grasped at inevitability—strode forth to meet it, aware of the low excited murmur that ran through the crowd behind him.

Ash, espying Rock, halted in his tracks. The two brothers rose in single action, as if actuated by the same spring. Range Preston stepped outside to join his brothers. Gage Preston did not see, nor look up, until Rock hailed them. Then, with spasmodic start, he staggered erect.

Ash Preston, seeing that Rock had sheered a little off a direct line, to approach his father, hurled an

imprecation, and fell to his swift, striding, sidelong stalk.

"Rock, I'm done," rasped Preston when Rock got to him. "So double-crossin' you like I did means nothin' to me."

"Preston, have you been in any of these last butcherin' deals?" queried Rock.

"No. An' so help me heaven, I couldn't stop Ash."

"Why did you send Thiry—persuadin' me to come in with you?"

"Thet was why. I wasn't beat then. I figgered I could fight it out an' I wanted you. So I drove Thiry to it. But now! You had it figgered, Rock. I'm sorry—sorry most fer Thiry, an' Ma, an' the girls. If I had it to do over again, I'd—"

"Do it now," interrupted Rock, ringingly. "Come with me to Wagontongue. The situation is no worse—for you. Come, Preston, be quick. There'll be hell poppin' here in a minute. Will you give up—go with me?"

"Rock, by heaven! I will—if you—"

"Yell that to Ash!" hissed Rock.

Preston, with face purpling, shouted to his son, "Hey, Ash!"

"What you want?" came the snarling answer.

"I'm goin' to town with Rock."

"What fer?" yelled Ash, as if stung.

"Wal, just off, I'm gettin' a marriage license for Thiry! Haw! Haw! Haw!"

"I say what fer?" yelled Ash.

"To pay your thievin' debts, you—!"

"Preston, get to one side. Quick!" warned Rock, risking one long stride forward, when he froze in his tracks, his right side toward Ash, his quivering hand low.

Ash Preston spat one curse at his father—then saw him no more. Again he began that strange sidelong stalk, only now he sheered a little, out toward Rock, forward a few strides, then backward the same, never turning that slim left side away from Rock.

Rock learned something then he never had known—Ash Preston was left-handed. He approached no closer than 30 paces. Then he did not or could not keep still. "Howdy, spy!" he called.

"Glad to meet you, beef rustler," returned Rock.

"Am givin' you my card pronto," called Ash, louder, more derisively.

"Gave you mine at the dance. But I got six left! *Caramba!*"

That stopped the restless crouching steps, but not the singular activity of body. Ash's muscles seemed to ripple. He crouched yet a little more. Rock could catch gleams of blue fire under the wide black brim of Ash's hat. *"Senor del Toro!"*

"Yes. And here's Thiry's mask—where she put it herself," flashed

Rock, striking his breast. "See if you can hit it!"

At the last he had the wit to throw Ash off a cool and deadly balance—so precious to men who live by the gun. When Ash jerked to his fatal move Rock was the quicker. His shot cracked a fraction of a second before his adversary's. Both took effect. It was as if Ash had been hit in the head by a club. Almost he turned a somersault.

Rock felt a shock, but no pain. He did not know where he was hit until his right leg gave way under him, letting him down. He fell, but caught himself with his left hand, and went no farther than his knees, the right of which buckled under him.

Ash bounded up as he had gone down, with convulsive tremendous power, the left side of his head shot away. Blood poured down. As he swept up his gun Rock shot him through the middle. The bullet struck up dust beyond and whined away. But Ash, sustaining the shock, fired again, and knocked Rock flat. The bullet struck high on his left shoulder. He heard two more heavy booms of Ash's gun, felt the sting of gravel on his face. Half rising, braced on his left hand, Rock fired again. He heard the bullet strike. Ash's fifth shot spanged off Rock's extended gun, knocked it flying, beyond reach.

Preston was sagging. Bloody, mortally stricken, he had no will except to kill. He saw his enemy prostrate, weaponless. He got his gun up, but could not align it, and his last bullet struck far beyond Rock, to whine away. He tried to fling the empty gun. It flipped at random. He swayed, all instinctive action ceasing, and with his ruthless eyes on his fallen foe, changing, glazing over, setting blank, he fell.

Gage Preston hurried to Rock's side. Men came running with hoarse shouts.

Chapter Fifteen

Back to Sunset Pass

When Rock came to his senses again he was lying on the floor of the cabin where seemingly only a few moments before he had given advice as to the proper care of the wounded Dunne.

He gazed around up at the grave faces of cowboys and cattlemen, at Gage Preston, who, grim and white, was binding his leg, at Peeples, still working over the prostrate Dunne.

"Preston, how is it—with Rock?" asked Dunne huskily.

"Wal, the top bullet glanced off the bone," replied the rancher. "Ugly hole, but nothin' fer this fellar. The leg shot, though, is bleedin' bad."

Rock became conscious of awakening pain, of a burning in his

breast and a dull spreading fire in his right leg.

Presently Preston rose from his task, wiping his bloody hands, and the voices of watchers ceased. "Somebody get Rock to town pronto," he said gruffly. "Ain't safe to let him wait fer the doctor."

"Lon Bailey has his four-seat buckboard," replied a cowboy. "We can take out the hind seat, an' fix a place for Rock to lay."

"Rustle now," replied Preston, and then bent his gloomy gaze down. "Rock, if the artery ain't cut you've nothin' bad. No bones broke."

"Gage, I'm—sorry," whispered Rock faintly. "No—other way."

"Ha! You needn't be. Shore, I'm not," rejoined the rancher.

"Will you—come to town?"

"Tomorrow. Me an' the boys will see Dabb. Mebbe it ain't too late."

"It—never—is, Preston."

"I'm thankin' you. Good-by an' good luck," he returned, and stamped out.

Rock closed his eyes.

"Say, fellars, nobody hain't told me what happened to thet Ash Preston," spoke up Dunne. "He's done fer me, an' most the same fer Rock. If you-all let him—"

"Daid," interrupted a blunt cowboy.

"Rock, you heah me?" said Dunne. "I had you wrong—an' I'm askin' pardon. An' fellars, if I have—to die—I'll go happy."

Merciful unconsciousness did not return to Rock. When strong and gentle hands lifted him into the buckboard he knew agony. When the swift wheels ran over a bump in the road it was like a rending of flesh and bone. He set his teeth and endured. Gray dawn and Wagontongue found him spent and in a daze of agony.

Rock was lying in the pleasant sitting-room of the Winters' home where a couch had been improvised for him. He had awakened to less torture, but he could move only his one arm and head. A fire crackled cheerfully in the small grate. Outside the window waved the branches of a pine tree and a soft sough of wind came strangely, like an accompaniment of something sad in the past.

Another day Rock awoke to rest, if not ease, and slowly the stream of consciousness resumed its flow.

The little doctor was cheerful that day. "You're like an Indian," he said, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. "Another week will see you up. Then pretty soon you can fork a hoss."

"How is your other patient?" asked Rock.

"Dunne is out of danger, I'm glad to say. But he will be a good while in bed."

Sol Winter came bustling in with an armful of firewood. "Mornin', son! You shore look fitter to me. How about him, Doc? Can we throw off the restrictions on grub an' talk?"

"I reckon," replied the physician, taking up his hat and satchel. "Now, Rock, brighten up. You've been so thick and gloomy. Good day."

"Wal, son, I almost feel young again this mornin'," said Sol cheerfully, as he kindled the fire. "Shore is some fine mornin'. First frost."

Then Mrs. Winter entered with breakfast for Rock. She was a slim, plain, busy little body, with gray hair, kindly eyes, and a motherly manner. "Do you hear the church bell?" she asked, as she deposited the tray on his lap.

"Sure. Then it's Sunday?"

"Yes, and another Sunday you might go to church, with a crutch."

"Me go to church? Lord, can't you see the congregation scatter?"

"Trueman, there's news," said Winter after his wife left the room. "Might as well get it over, huh?"

"I reckon so," rejoined Rock slowly.

"Gage Preston paid me the money you gave Slagle. Yesterday, before he left."

"Left?" echoed Rock.

"Yep, he left on Number Ten for Colorado," replied Winter, evidently gratified over the news he had to impart. "Go on with your breakfast, son. I'll talk. I've been wantin' to for days. Rock, it all turned out better'n we dared hope. They tell me Hesbitt was stubborn as a mule, but Dabb an' Lincoln together flattened him out soft. I got it all from Amy, who has been most darn keen to help. Rock, thet little lady has a bad conscience over somethin'. Wal, with the steer market jumpin' to seventy-five, even Hesbitt couldn't stay sore long. They fixed it up out of court. Dabb an' Lincoln made it easy for Preston. They bought him out, ranch, stock, an' all. Cost Preston somethin' big to square up, but at thet he went away heeled. I seen him at the station."

"Did he go—alone?" asked Rock.

"No. His three grown sons were with him. All slicked up. Shore is an adventure for them. Looked to me they didn't care much. At thet, there's darned little gossip. The rest of the Prestons are in town, but I haven't seen them. Funny Thiry doesn't run in to see me. I met Sam Whipple's wife. She saw Thiry an' Alice, who are stayin' at Farrell's. She said she couldn't see much sign of Thiry's takin' Ash's death very hard. Thet shore stumped me. But Thiry is game."

He went out, leaving Rock prey to rediscovered emotions. He had sacrificed his love to save Thiry's father, and therefore her, from

ignominy. The thing could not have been helped. It had from the very first, that day in the corral here at Wagontongue, been fixed, and as fateful as the beautiful passion Thiry had roused in him. He had no regret. He would not have changed it, at cost to her.

But with the accepted catastrophe faced now, there came pangs that dwarfed those of gunshot wounds. His heart would not break, because he had wonderful assurance of her love, of the sacrifice she had tried to make for him. His sluggish blood stirred to swift heat. She would go away with her family, and in some other state recover from this disaster, forget, and touch happiness, perhaps with some fortunate man who might win her regard. But she owed that to him. And he realized that when the poignancy of first grief had softened, he would find melancholy consolation in the memory of the service he had rendered her.

"Son, lady to see you," announced Winter, not long after he had made Rock presentable.

"Who?" asked Rock, with a start.

"No one but Amy."

"Tell her I'm sleepin' or—or somethin'," implored Rock.

"Like hob he will," replied a gay voice from behind the door. And Amy entered, pretty and stylish, just a little fearful and pale, despite her nerve.

"Well, how do, Amy?" said Rock, and then he laughed. Amy's presence was always difficult to deny gladly.

"Trueman, are you all right?" she asked timidly. "Oh, Trueman, I've been in a horrible state ever since I came home."

"Well! I'm sorry, Amy. How so?"

"I hate to tell you, but I've got to," she replied. "For it was my last, miserable, horrible trick! Trueman, the day I got back I met Ash Preston on the street. I told him you—you were Senor del Toro. He laughed in my face—called me a jealous liar. But afterward I began to fear he'd believe me and I fell to worrying. You cannot imagine what I felt when they fetched you here—all shot up. Trueman, I don't want to abase myself utterly in your sight, but—well, I am a chastened woman. It made me merciless to myself. It opened my eyes. I told my husband, and since then we've grown closer than we ever were."

"Then, Amy, I forgive you."

Quick as a bird she pecked at his cheek, to lift a flushing, radiant face. "There! The first sisterly one I ever gave you. Trueman, I am the bearer of good news. You are a big man now. Yes, sir, in spite of—or perhaps because of—that awful gun of yours. But your honesty has gone farther with John

and Tom Lincoln. I have the pleasure of telling you that you've been chosen to run the Sunset Pass Ranch for them. On shares."

"Never, Amy, never!" cried Rock, shivering. "I shall leave Wagontongue again—soon as I can walk."

"Not if *we* all know it," she retorted as she rose, with inscrutable eyes on him. "You've got more friends than you think. Now I'll go. I've excited you enough today. But I'll come again soon. Goodby."

Amy had hardly gone when a squeak of the door and a deep expulsion of breath from someone entering aroused Rock. He gave such a start that his stiff injured leg reminded him of his condition. Thiry had entered. She leaned against the wall. She was bareheaded, and her soft hat dropped from nerveless hands.

"Thiry!—how good—of you!"

Haltingly she approached, as if the impelling force that drew her was only slightly stronger than something which held her back. "Trueman, are you—all right?" she asked, apparently awed at the helpless length of him there on the bed. She sat down beside him, and her eyes, black with thought and pain, followed her reaching hand, to rest on the coverlet over his knee.

"Reckon I'm 'most all right—now," he replied, sensitive to her touch.

"Mr. Winter told me everything," she went on, "but *seeing* you is so strange. Can you move?"

"Sure. All but my left leg."

"Was that broken?"

"No, I'm glad to tell you."

"Then you can ride again?"

"Some day."

"And the other hurt—was that here?" she asked, pale, almost reverent, as she laid a soft hand high upon his left shoulder.

"Lower down—Thiry."

Fascinated, she gently slipped her hand down over the bandage. "Here?"

"Still lower."

Then she felt the throbbing of his heart. "But, Trueman—it couldn't be there."

"You bet it is."

"What?"

"The hurt you asked about."

"I was speaking of your latest wounds," she replied. Then she looked him squarely in the face, which she had failed to do before. "I had to fight myself to come," she said. "There was a cold, dead, horrible something inside me—but it's leaving! Trueman, you're so white and thin. So helpless lying there! I —I want to nurse you. I should have come. Have you suffered?"

"A little—I reckon," he replied unsteadily. "But it's—gone now."

"Has Amy Dabb been here?" she asked jealously.

"Yes. Today. She was very nice."

"Nice! Because she wheedled John Dabb to offer you the running of Sunset Pass Ranch?"

"Oh no—I mean, just kind," returned Rock uncertainly. He was of half a mind to believe this delirium.

"Trueman, you will accept that offer?" she queried earnestly. "I don't care what Amy says. I know it was my father's advice to Dabb."

"Me ever go to—Sunset Pass—again? Never in this world."

"Trueman, you would not leave this country?" she asked in alarm.

"Soon as I can walk."

"But *I* do not want to leave Sunset Pass," she returned with spirit.

"I'm glad you don't. Reckon that's a surprise, Thiry. It's very beautiful — out there. Perhaps, somehow, it can be arranged for you. Someone, of course, will take the place. Is your mother leavin' soon?"

"She is terribly angry with Dad," replied Thiry seriously. "But I think some day she'll get over it—when Dad makes a new home—and go back to him."

She edged a little closer, grave and sweet, and suddenly bent over to kiss his knee where the bandage made a lump, and then she moved up to lay her cheek over his heart, with a long low sigh. "Trueman, did you think I'd—hate you for killing Ash?" she whispered.

He could not speak.

"I thought I would. And it was a sickening, terrible blow. But before that same night was over I knew I couldn't hate you. And I believe, even if I hadn't learned what changed it all, I would have forgiven you—some day."

"What changed all?" burst out Rock, in insupportable suspense.

"What Dad told me."

"Thiry—have mercy!"

"Ash was not my brother," she said, in smothered voice, and her hand sought his cheek.

Rising, Thiry slipped to the floor on her knees, and leaned upon her elbows, clasping his hands, regarding him with remorseful tenderness. "My brother Range beat the others home that night, with the news of the fight. I had my terrible black hours. Thank God they are past. I knew we were ruined—that Ash in some way had brought it about. Perhaps my love for him turned then. But I want you to know that even then believing Ash my brother I'd have forgiven you in time. I know it. After the agony was spent I was learning how deathlessly I loved you. Sometime in the night, late, Dad came to me. Never had I seen him gentle, sad, defeated, yet something better for that. . . . He told me not to take it too hard—not to visit the sins of others upon your head. You had been driven to kill Ash. Someone

had to do it, for the good of all, and no one but you *could*. He told me how he had inflamed Ash. Then the fight! Ah, God, he did—not—spare me.

"Then came the story, torn from his most secret heart. Ash was not his son, but the illegitimate son of a girl he had loved long ago, who, abandoned and dying, gave him her child. That child was Ash. And Dad said he was what his father had been. I was not yet born. But when I came, Ash was my playmate. I remember when we were children. He was always vicious to everyone except me. And so I grew up loving him, perhaps for that. Next day I went to mother, and she corroborated Dad's story. It seemed I was delivered from hellish bonds."

"Thiry darlin'—there must be somethin' in prayer," cried Rock.

"I was to learn how you had bought Slagle's silence—how you persuaded Dabb and Lincoln to force Hesbitt to settle out of court—oh, how from the very beginning you had meant good by all of us! Yet I could not drag myself to you. It took time. I had such dreadful fear of seeing you lying in danger of death, bloody, pale, with awful eyes that would have accused me. Oh, I suffered! But now I'm here—on my knees."

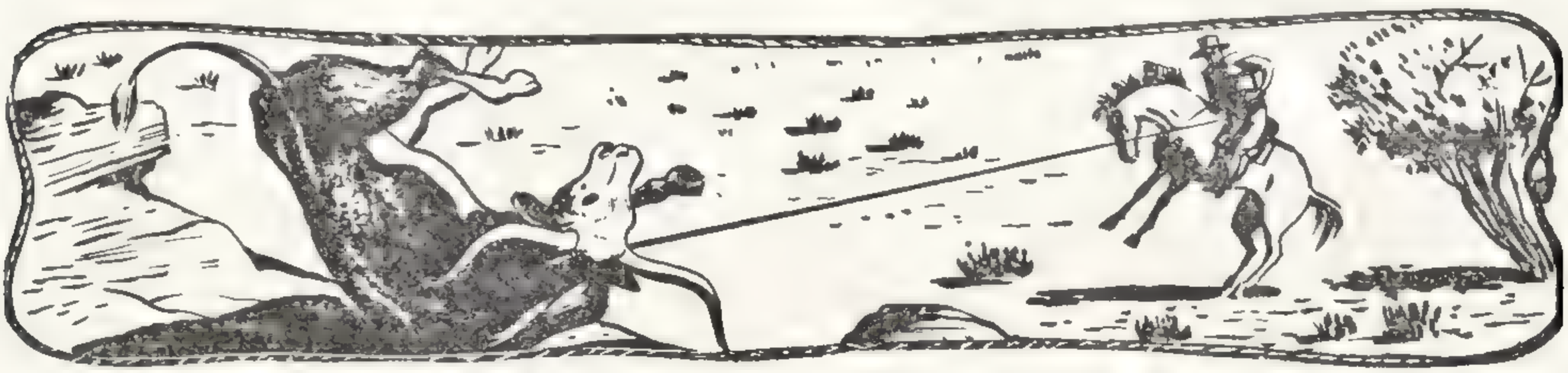
"Please get up," said Rock, lifting her to a seat beside him.

"Now will you accept Dabb's offer and take me back to Sunset Pass?" she asked, bending to him

"Yes, Thiry, if you will have it so," he replied. "If you love me that well."

She gave him passionate proof of that. "Dear, I understand better. Dad told me you were one of the marked men of the ranges. Our West is in the making. Such men as Ash—and those others you—"

Sol Winter came in upon them "Wal, I knocked twice, an' then I says I'd better go in." He beamed down upon them. "Son an' lass. I'm glad to see you holdin' each other thet way—as if now you'd never let go. For I've grown old on the frontier, an' I've seen but little of the love you have for each other. We Westerners are a hard pioneering outfit. I see in you, an' Allie, an' some more of our young friends, a leanin' more to finer, better things."



The other punchers can't help wondering why the new hand prefers to work by himself, but he has his reasons—and after a few years "Jim Coebey" seems to be a fixture at the little line cabin. Then, too, Coebey has a knack for finding things—his big "strike" coming when he locates that long-lost placer camp of the Chinese prospectors. This decidedly different Western short story now appears in print for the first time.

PASTURE IN THE ABANDONED PLACERS

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

JIM COBEY was riding for the Boxed Tally outfit of the Buckle Mountain country, where there had been a placer gold excitement in the days of Plummer's outlaw band. Those mountains and their foothills had been bad. Wherever miners had made a camp there was sure to be a place set aside for the burying of the dead. The Boxed Tally pasture was scattering, grass here and there in patches up canyons and alongside foothills and in flats where beaver ponds had filled up. Jim had to ride up and down watching small bunches of cows herded onto grass that would carry them through the late spring and summer into shipping time. The work suited Coebey, who knew cows and horses, but this was all Putt Winders, owner of the Tally Brand, knew about him—or wanted to know. He was dark, slim, blue-eyed, wiry.

Coebey talked little and never about himself, before he moseyed back up into that bleak Buckle Mountain country. Fellow riders liked him. He listened good. That puttering, lonely patch-pasture riding was mean work for anyone who liked to have a pal, the excite-

ment of the ranch kitchen and dormitory lobby. Coebey preferred living alone in the cabin in the scattered cattle country, over which hung the thousand traditions and rumors of the early gold furor days. He looked often over his shoulders.

"A man might's well be a sheepherder, living back there like Jim Coebey!" main outfit riders declared. "Why, he don't see nobody once a week—probably once in two-three weeks!"

Coebey smiled at the interest and talk his preference aroused. He didn't mind. He lived his own life, did what he wanted, and asked no better. He not only knew the cattle he was tending—he knew bear, deer, cougar, coyote, jays and even otter, beaver, and a lot of other wild folk. In winter, when he was out of work three or four months, he cashed in, trapping furs—but no one had any real idea of how much he caught or how large was his income from his wildlife knowledge. However, he was thrifty. He went to town seldom and spent little—and that for first-class clothes, outfit, ammunition, and new ropes.

One by one, Coebey found the sites of old placer camps up creeks and brooks, and in washes that were dry part of the year. His riding tended to, he would walk up and down, followed by a horse—he had five or six, all pets—looking for "sign." He found many camps where perhaps one man, perhaps 15 or 20 men, had spent weeks, months, even years, stripping the pay-gravels of dust, flakes and nuggets. Time and again the first evidence of a camp would be a cross of charred sticks or hewn saplings, where a man had been buried.

Somewhere within a few rods, there would be the camp site. The brush and canvas shelters were gone, long since. Occasionally there was the rectangle of a log cabin, sagging down, no more than four lines of punk wood. And wherever there was a camp, poking around and scraping away the fallen leaves, the blown sand, the other things from moss to weeds and shrubs with which Nature covers its raw wounds, presently Coebey found things—broken brass kettles, rusted knives, worn out and discarded picks and shovels, and in some places variously shaped bottles and jugs and demijohns fairly corded or heaped up. One needed to find only one or two things to make an hour or two of time-killing really worth while.

But Coebey found more than discarded and broken things. When he had spent the spare time of two or three summers puttering around those forgotten ruins, graves, and placer gold washes, his knowledge became fairly instinctive, and he was guided along footpaths no one

had trodden since miners, draft-dodgers, outlaws, gamblers and hunters had traversed them in the gold excitement in the '60's. And one such footpath, hidden and unblazed but faintly trodden, led him to a rock ledge and behind wedged-in stones he came upon a stiff raw-hide poke which contained more than a pound of 18- or 19-carat gold—$250 worth in any assayer's office.

Another time, among charred remains, cooking utensils, dishes, bottles, trousers buttons, knives with the handles burned off, a bent muzzle-loading rifle barrel and a long daub of lead that had melted and run, he found where gold had been hidden in the knotholes or chinks between the logs—better than $100 worth, down on the gravel on which the cabin had been built. And poking around on the ground where boughs had been thrown down for mattresses, Coebey found things that had been lost out of the pockets of men sleeping in their clothes—coins, knives, fire-flints, lead bullets, early-day copper cartridges, and queer pepperbox and derringer and muzzle-loading pistols.

The Boxed Tally's outlying cabin became something of a museum, with its accumulation of junk. Coebey didn't tell or show the placer gold, the coins, the little valuables that he found. He hid out treasure, as had the old miners. Even when he had helped drive the cattle down to where Putt Winders carried his stock through the winters, Coebey used the ranch cabin up against the foothills as his main cabin from which to trap, there to live through the unpaid winter season, running high-line set traps for marten, fisher, fox, with now and then a coarse-hair hide of coyote, wolf, cougar. Coebey met a fur-buyer in the early spring and sold his pelts, for better than cowboy wages usually, but no one knew what he did with his fur money or his unspent wages.

Coebey was a fixture, back in the patch pasturage of the hills. Playfully, his fellow riders accused him of saving his money to buy cows and stock a ranch somewhere. He shook his head, regretfully, it seemed. He gave the impression that he couldn't go outside, couldn't mingle with ranchers, buyers, traders, or passersby on the main trails. Somewhere, he had learned to look over his shoulders and to study the features of each new stranger who came into view. He didn't look like a man who had done meanness, or made relentless enemies, but he acted like one.

Sometimes Putt Winders, riding up to the outlying cabin, would find the cowboy gone over a night, even two nights. Coebey would

come in presently, with a bed roll on a pack horse with overnight outfit—plenty for comfort in the stinging high altitude air. Winders knew he had been away out on the edge of the cow domain, choosing to sleep out instead of making too long a riding day. Coebey would bring in a bag of relics he had found up canyons and along the high creeks where prospectors had made placer strikes and camped.

Coebey wasn't secretive about what he was finding. He brought in weaselskin pokes he had made, emptied spoonfuls or sometimes a cupful of gold nuggets or dust, and showed his employer the finds. The little hoards didn't amount to much, but they added the zest of $10 or $20 a month on the side—good wages for the hours Coebey put in prowling around. Winders approved of these diversions. It kept a good man contented with the lonesomest of beef pasturing jobs.

Then Coebey found the Lost Chinamen's Diggings. Winders had heard the story when he was a boy. A Chinese had come into Trick Waters, the trading center of the old placer diggings in the Buckle Mountains. Liu Chow opened a lunchroom, where he cooked game and baked pies and served flapjacks, rice pudding and whatever things he could get to serve hungry hickory-shirted men. Other Chinese appeared, stayed a day or two and then quietly got out of sight, only to appear again a month or two later, bringing out wild meat, mountain-stream fish, skins. When berries were ripe, they supplied fillings for pies that sold for two-bits a one-sixth cut, and were considered cheap at that.

But the provisions were only a cover-up. Those Chinese were bringing out pokes of gold, too, and paid for supplies at the general store with dull yellow particles that assayed a dollar a carat—$18 an ounce. Efforts to trail the yellow-skinned miners were futile; they guarded their secret well. They brought in nuggets worth $5 or so, as well as fine dust that had apparently been caught in a cloth screen.

Liu Chow was friendly, popular, and generous. Many a hungry man received a bag of grub at the back door of the restaurant; and when some boisterous rider began to spread himself, beginning on Liu Chow or one of the restaurant keeper's fellow countrymen, there were always men out around to bring the bully to time, pronto. Not only that, but an understanding among the local citizens brought together an efficient "Committee" which knew exactly how to enforce rights in a land where formal law was yet unknown.

Then, one spring, the Chinese miners did not appear. Their buying was missed, as the snow melt ran down the streams into the faraway Missouri or Colorado—nobody was quite sure where the impassible canyons led to, eventually. Spring passed into summer.

Liu Chow asked miners coming in from their diggings about his friends, or his relations—nobody knew for certain about this group. When Federal mint coins were scarce, Liu Chow would pass out disks of brass, with square holes in the center, in place of nickels or dimes. Liu had only a few handfuls of these pieces of brass, but they served a welcome purpose.

The Chinese miners did not show up. They had gone out in the autumn, as usual, supplied for the winter. Liu Chow tried to tell where they had gone. Apparently, one of them had found a creek, up which was a deep, narrow canyon. There, in a gravel bar, they had found gold—not a lot of it, but enough so that 10 or 15 of them could make miners' day wages. They lived on fish, game, rice. Thus out of their day's take of $4 or $8, whatever they averaged, they saved the equivalent of nearly half an ounce of 16- or 18-carat dust and nuggets.

When the placers played out and the miners took their departure, the fate of the Chinese was still a mystery. Liu Chow waxed older and older, friendlier and more liberal. When Trick Waters had shrunk to a handful of loyalists who would not leave the Buckle Mountains, one of the traditions was the story of the lost Chinese placer. It was somewhere up against those rough, frost-split, water-worn, wind-sanded, snow-gashed mountains. The roots of trees had pried up the loosely fastened particles of stone, water had dissolved the stone into foodstuff for plants, and here and there among the plants were patches of strong grass, and Putt Winders's pap had taken over these patches in tens of thousands of acres to grow beef—and be damned to the illusion of wealth in particles of gold whose parent lode could not be found!

One day Jim Coebey made one of his rare visits to the ranch. He brought out a pocketful of those round disks of metal which were called "cash" by Liu Chow and which were occasionally found in the streets of Trick Waters, now coming alive because of beef ranches, occasional hunters and trappers, and a roadway through a pass in the mountains over which restless people came and went.

Jim gave the boys some of the "cash" for pocket pieces. They were blackened by long exposure, but many of the riders carried them for luck. A man could be flat

broke, and yet have some cash in his pocket!

Jim told his story. He had been riding hither and yon, bringing back strays, and making sure that all the cattle in his charge were where they belonged, when he found what he called a "stone bridge." Water had undercut a cliff of rock about 300 feet high. Gravel and sand, shingle, and some small boulders had washed out under the high perpendicular rock. The water was a constant stream running deep in a gulch, and a pine thicket veiled the opening.

The cowboy left his horse and headed up the creek. The water was low and after passing a few rods under the "bridge" he came into a wider gulch. After a mile or two, the gulch opened out into a valley, and there at the foot of the valley lay the ruins resulting from an avalanche. The melting snow in a long-ago spring had loosened earth, trees, roots, rock and debris 2,000 or 3,000 feet up the precipitous slope, and had come snaking and bounding down the mountain, heaping up the mass of its accumulation in the valley, up against the narrows at a little precipice.

That dammed the creek. It stopped the runoff of the spring melt. The spreading flat of several hundred acres had been overflowed, over the creek channel, to a depth of more than 50 feet. A lake more than a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide had been formed. Then the water began to find its way over the top of this natural dam and on down under the ledge the soft base of which had been cut through. Erosion did its work. Sand, clay, gravel, broken bits of wood were washed down the stream, through the narrows and toward the far gulf of California or of Mexico.

When Jim Coebey arrived at that old avalanche jam, the water had washed out the loose stone, earth and clay, leaving a pile of heaped up driftwood. The pile was impassable, except around on the north side of the valley. Jim climbed up around, and when he could see above the jam out across the site of the old dam pond, he looked down on the one-time bottom of the lake, or natural reservoir. There were the ancient flats, uncovered in the past few years. There were ditches and mounds of gravel and even waterlogged flumes and cradles, miners' picks and shovels, and the remains of an ancient placer digging.

Of the ancient lake only a quarter mile of still water remained, and this was backed into some of those ditches that had brought water down to the diggings, where miners washed out gold. The cow-

boy's curiosity was not easily satisfied. He couldn't see where the miners had their camp. The day was shortening, so he headed up over the hillside around that ancient punk-wood driftpile and down on the lower side he had an idea—perhaps that wood could be burned away. He started a fire above the creek flow, where the wood was twisted and broken, and watched it start burning.

The flame ran swiftly up the face of the huge pile. It began to burn back into the mass, and presently a boulder came rolling and bobbing down, released by the flames. Jim watched almost too long, backing away as the heat increased. He returned down under the stone-ledge bridge, found his way to his horse in the twilight, built a fire and cooked some venison, and rolled up in his blankets to sleep. In the morning his bonfire was still burning, so he rode away, looking after his cows. It was several days before he returned to the hidden valley.

When Jim did return to the natural dam, he found fire still smouldering in the debris. However, the huge pile of avalanche drift had burned down to gravel and boulders. The creek was carrying away the ashes and dead coals.

There on the sidehill was a cave, with just a crack showing. Coebey found a shovel at the diggings with a handle that had turned hard, instead of rotting away. With this he shoveled his way into the cave. Back in, it had been picked and chiseled out, and there was quite a room, with a dome overhead and a floor on a rock-ledge top. When Jim got a light going, he found he was in a workshop, with old tools. There was a joss sitting in a niche which had been cut out to hold him, and candles and punk-sticks, with which the cave had been lighted and the god placated with fragrance.

Once he could see clearly, Coebey discovered thousands of those queer coins called "cash." The cave had been flowed full of water and the contents of stoneware jars had been diluted with water, but they were still strong with the odor of acid. The cash were strung on rawhide thongs, or were stacked up in rawhide pokes.

There were pokes of gold dust too, and curiously enough, the hides had survived years of submersion, perhaps because of the alkali in the water. Now that the water was drained away, the skins still held the nuggets, dust, flakes.

"I brought away a nice jag!" Coebey admitted, grinning. He had found something over 100 pounds of placer gold, and that figured better than $20,000 of 18-carat stuff.

Apparently Jim Coebey was

queer, a little off in his mind. He had worked back there in that scattering pasture for years. Now he was rich, even after paying income tax! Buying mortgages, investing in real estate, starting a ranch—he could be somebody! Instead of that he stayed up there on his job, riding line and trapping. At the same time, he brought out handfuls of those cash—Chinese coins with holes in them. Of course, they were worth about ten for a cent, but Jim laughed about that. "It just shows how thrifty those Chinks were!" he said. "They must have packed in loads and loads of brass to make them cash. In the cave were dies, twelve or fourteen of them, and a big stamp for cutting and drilling them. Why, I bet there's practically a ton of them laid out before that joss, and spread around on stone-bench shelves they chiseled out of the walls! And look't those stone jars! Why, those darned things weigh forty-fifty pounds! And stink—Gosh!"

Jim Coebey never got over looking over his shoulders, watching any stranger who came to town, and men who saw him going up the trail to his line cabin noticed particularly that when he came to a ridge top he would get over out of sight and then come back to watch his back trail as if he half expected somebody to follow him. One time when a prospector happened to come in behind him on his way to the cabin, Jim hauled off with his 30-30 and let go two or three shots —he like to have killed old-timer Berry Brent that day.

"Course, Jim has his reasons!" men said, and nobody visited him back there at the top of the foothills.

Three years after Jim located the old Chinese diggings and found out the Oriental miners had been killed by a landslide, which explained why none of them ever came out again, he came out to the Boxed Tally ranch. He had been back there, now, about 15 years. He seemed to be like a fixture that nobody expected ever to see leave. His earlier aloofness softened and whatever worried him receded further and further in his mind.

He brought out a pocketful of those cash every trip, and he came oftener to Trick Waters. Youngsters got to know him, and he gave them each good-luck cash. Of course, they weren't legal, he said, for those Chinese made them back there in the Buckle Mountains, which indicated they were counterfeits, but that just made them more interesting. And wasn't it like them to trade their gold for brass and stamp the brass into cash, worth five cents or so a pound? Who would want to carry out brass coins, instead of gold dust?

Coebey came down to Trick Waters one trading day, needing ammunition, hard candy, a pair of leis, a new Stetson—he spent better than $60 that day. Storekeepers could hardly remember a time when he spent anything like that money.

Jim was cheerful, smiling, and generous that morning. He got candy for a dozen kids, and all the people he knew stopped to say howdy, and he didn't seem to have a trouble in the world. He went to the restaurant, which another Chinese ran now. He ate a big dinner, came out picking his teeth, and for the first time anyone remembered ever noticing, he didn't pause, look both ways along the street with that covert way he had. He just watched a small boy being led along by a big, shaggy mongrel dog. And then—

"Hey, Pack, I got yo'!" There stood a grim, lanky stranger, wearing a Mexican jacket, woolen trousers, fancy boots, and a wide hat tipped down over his left ear. Two guns were in holsters at his belt and his hands were empty.

Jim Coebey jerked up and stepped back. The smile on his face froze as his lips turned gray and his skin blue.

"Get yore gun, damn yo'!" the stranger snarled. "Hit's my turn now! *Get yore gun!*"

Jim Coebey got his gun. Caught off guard, cornered after years of waiting, there he stood—easy prey if a man wanted to shoot, practically from ambush! But this stranger asked no more advantage than the surprise.

Jim Coebey had always bought lots of ammunition. Nobody had ever seen him shoot. Now they saw him draw and shoot from the hip, from elbow level and then pointing from the height of his eyes. Three shots, and at each shot the challenger staggered back a step—three steps, while he fumbled with both hands for a tight grip on his gun butts.

Coebey cocked his revolver again, and got down into the sight, particular now, but the stranger bulged his eyes and the light went out of them. He sagged down like a loose bag of potatoes.

Jim Coebey stood there blowing the smoke out of his gun barrel, looking ready to collapse himself, but he mustered his nerve, collected his wits, stiffened his joints. Coming across the street, bounding, was City Marshal Gabriel.

"By God, Jim! I thought he'd get yo'!" Gabriel exclaimed. "My law, but yo' made the prettiest draw I eveh seen! 'Tain't none of my business, but I bet yo' come from the Ozark Mountings oveh in Missouri—"

"That's clost enough to be 'most right! Paw was from them parts.

He taught me young to shoot—fast! But I was a coward, Marshal! When the time come—I run fo' it! I neveh knowed I'd have the guts to—to shoot back—or first, if'n I had a break." Then Jim Coebey turned with his face in his elbow, leaning against the restaurant window corner, sobbing. But his friends didn't think it was funny—Jim had killed his man before he lost his nerve.

The youngster leading the dog Jim had been watching let go of the rope and ran to hang on Jim's belt. That braced him a bit, and he patted the boy on the head and put a handful of the Chinese cash into his pockets. Then Jim asked the marshal when he'd be needed.

"No time!" Gabriel shook his head. "That was a damned purty se'f-defense, if theh eveh was one!"

Coebey turned away. He went to the livery stable, where he got his saddle and pack horses, gathered up his purchases and rode out of town—but not until he had given the marshal two $20 pieces and one $10 gold piece to recompense the taxpayers for burying his victim. Coebey was gone only a week.

When he returned he was no longer a cowboy rider. He had three horses loaded with packs, one running loose, and one he rode. "Yes, suh, I'm on my way," Coebey said, shaking hands with his friends. "That scoundrel had me buf'loed. He 'lowed he'd kill me. Boy an' man he abused me. He 'lowed to beat me up with his fists, but I knocked hell out of him. When he come to, he promised to shoot me daid on sight. He'd done hit, too. So I lit out on him. Course—well, theh was his wife, too—so I come away, scairt up. So he had to find me. I don't know how he done hit, but he did. So now—I'm going back."

Jim Coebey—real name Pack something—rode down the trail and cut across, vanishing from the ken of the Buckle Mountain country. He had added something new to the story of the Chinese placer diggings, lost back there in the rough and slide of the Buckles—more than he knew.

One day a man to whom Jim had given cash while he was young noticed that his lucky pocket piece had scaled. He hooked away the thin sheet of brass and found under it a metal of reddish instead of brassy color. That night at home, he found a handful of cash Jim had given him. Sure enough, they all looked brassy, but here and there one scaled. Jerry Cole took the cash the next time he went to the city, and showed them to an assayer. He looked at them, hefted them in his hand, lifted scales with his thumbnail as Jerry had done. Then he tried the metal with acid. The thin scale sizzled, and when the scale had been eaten away, there re-

mained a disk, neatly stamped with Chinese characters, but pure gold, worth $20 an ounce at the mints.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Jerry Cole exclaimed, when the assayer paid him $160 for all but one of those cash he had brought down.

"Gold counterfeits of brass cash?" the assayer asked in a puzzled voice.

"That's about the size of it!" Jerry told him. "I'm going to find out about that, you betcha!"

. Accordingly, Jerry returned somewhat impatiently to Trick Waters. He tried to find out where that cave was, back in a lost valley of the Buckle Mountains. Of course, everyone knew the story Jim Coebey had told about that joss house of the chink miners who had been killed in the avalanche, and whose placer diggings had been overflowed by the water dammed by the landslide. Jim had come away with a hundredweight and more of raw gold, and he had handed out 15 or 20 pounds of those cash —mostly to be lost by the youngsters, but a few pounds had been saved.

Those smelly stoneware jars had been acid baths of brass with which to coat the disks of gold, so nobody would suspect how much they were really worth—probably a mighty good protection against raiders. According to Jim Coebey's tell, there was perhaps a ton of that "counterfeit" treasure-money back there in the joss cave. And Jim didn't know it, any more than anyone else.

What became of Jim? He just rode out, like everyone knew. He hadn't told anybody how to find that hidden valley and the joss cave with 10 or 20 pack-horse loads of gold cash—just going to waste.

"Now ain't that a hell of a note?" men demanded. "We can't find Coebey and we can't find them Chinese diggings!"

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

By Bret Harte

BRET HARTE *wrote many famous tales of the Old West. This one, while not as well known as "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" or "The Luck of Roaring Camp," will stand a second—or third—reading equally well. It is the first of a series of classic stories of the West which will appear regularly in* ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE. *Its first publication (in book form, anyway) was in* The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches, *in* 1870.

I DO NOT THINK that we ever knew his real name. Our ignorance of it certainly never gave us any social inconvenience, for at Sandy Bar in 1854 most men were christened anew. Sometimes these appellatives were derived from some distinctiveness of dress, as in the case of "Dungaree Jack"; or from some peculiarity of habit, as shown in "Saleratus Bill," so called from an undue proportion of that chemical in his daily bread; or from some unlucky slip, as exhibited in "The Iron Pirate," a mild, inoffensive man, who earned that baleful title by his unfortunate mispronunciation of the term "iron pyrites."

Perhaps this may have been the beginning of a rude heraldry; but I am constrained to think that it was because a man's real name in that day rested solely upon his own unsupported statement. "Call yourself Clifford, do you?" said Boston, addressing a timid newcomer with infinite scorn; "hell is full of such Cliffords!" He then introduced the unfortunate man, whose name happened to be really Clifford, as "Jay-bird Charley,"—an unhallowed inspiration of the moment that clung to him ever after.

But to return to Tennessee's Partner, whom we never knew by any other than this relative title; that he had ever existed as a separate and distinct individuality we only learned later. It seems that in 1853 he left Poker Flat to go to San Francisco, ostensibly to procure a wife. He never got any farther than Stockton. At that place he was attracted by a young person who waited upon the table at the hotel where he took his meals.

One morning he said something to her which caused her to smile not unkindly, to somewhat coquettishly break a plate of toast over his upturned, serious, simple face, and to retreat to the kitchen. He followed her, and emerged a few moments later, covered with more toast and victory. That day week they were married by a Justice of the Peace, and returned to Poker Flat. I am aware that something more might be made of this episode, but I prefer to tell it as it was current at Sandy Bar, in the gulches and barrooms, where all sentiment was modified by a strong sense of humor.

Of their married felicity but little is known, perhaps for the reason that Tennessee, then living with his partner, one day took occasion to say something to the bride on his own account, at which, it is said, she smiled not unkindly and chastely retreated, this time as far as Marysville, where Tennessee followed her, and where they went to housekeeping without the aid of a Justice of the Peace.

Tennessee's Partner took the loss of his wife simply and seriously, as was his fashion. But to everybody's surprise, when Tennessee one day returned from Marysville without his partner's wife—she having smiled and retreated with somebody else—Tennessee's Partner was the first man to shake his hand and greet him with affection. The boys who had gathered in the canyon to see the shooting were naturally indignant. Their indignation might have found vent in sarcasm but for a certain look in Tennessee's Partner's eye that indicated a lack of humorous appreciation. In fact, he was a grave man, with a steady application to practical detail which was unpleasant in a difficulty.

Meanwhile a popular feeling against Tennessee had grown up on the Bar. He was known to be a gambler; he was suspected to be a thief. In these suspicions Tennessee's Partner was equally compromised; his continued intimacy with Tennessee after the affair above quoted could only be accounted for on the hypothesis of a copartnership of crime. At last Tennessee's guilt became flagrant. One day he overtook a stranger on his way to Red Dog. The stranger afterward related that Tennessee beguiled the time with interesting anecdote and reminiscence, but illogically concluded the interview in the following words: "And now, young man, I'll trouble you for your knife, your pistols, and your money. You see, your weppings might get you into trouble at Red Dog, and your money's a temptation to the evilly disposed. I think you said your address was San Francisco. I shall endeavor to call."

It may be stated here that Tennessee had a fine flow of humor, which no business preoccupation could wholly subdue.

This exploit was his last. Red Dog and Sandy Bar made common cause against the highwayman. Tennessee was hunted in very much the same fashion as his prototype, the grizzly. As the toils closed around him, he made a desperate dash through the Bar, emptying his revolver at the crowd before the Arcade Saloon, and so on up Grizzly Canyon; but at its farther extremity he was stopped by a small man on a gray horse. The men looked at each other a moment in silence. Both were fearless, both self-possessed and independent; and both types of a civilization that in the 17th century would have been called heroic, but, in the 19th, simply reckless.

"What have you got there?—I call," said Tennessee quietly.

"Two bowers and an ace," said the stranger, as quietly, showing two revolvers and a bowie knife.

"That takes me," returned Tennessee; and with this gamblers' epigram, he threw away his useless pistol, and rode back with his captor. It was a warm night. The cool breeze which usually sprang up with the going down of the sun behind the chaparral-crested mountain was that evening withheld from Sandy Bar. The little canyon was stifling with heated resinous odors, and the decaying driftwood on the Bar sent forth faint, sickening exhalations. The feverishness of day, and its fierce passions, still filled the camp. Lights moved restlessly along the bank of the river, striking no answering reflection from its tawny current. Against the blackness of the pines the windows of the old loft above the express office stood out staringly bright; and through their curtainless panes the loungers below could see the forms of those who were even then deciding the fate of Tennessee. And above all this, etched on the dark firmament, rose the Sierra, remote and passionless, crowned with remoter passionless stars.

The trial of Tennessee was conducted as fairly as was consistent with a judge and jury who felt themselves to some extent obliged to justify, in their verdict, the previous irregularities of arrest and indictment. The law of Sandy Bar was implacable, but not vengeful. The excitement and personal feeling of the chase were over; with Tennessee safe in their hands they were ready to listen patiently to any defense, which they were already satisfied was insufficient. There being no doubt in their own minds, they were willing to give the prisoner the benefit of any that might exist. Secure in the hypothesis that he ought to be hanged on general

principles, they indulged him with more latitude of defense than his reckless hardihood seemed to ask.

The Judge appeared to be more anxious than the prisoner, who, otherwise unconcerned, evidently took a grim pleasure in the responsibility he had created. "I don't take any hand in this yer game," had been his invariable, but good-humored reply to all questions.

The Judge—who was also his captor—for a moment vaguely regretted that he had not shot him on sight that morning, but presently dismissed this human weakness as unworthy of the judicial mind. Nevertheless, when there was a tap at the door, and it was said that Tennessee's Partner was there on behalf of the prisoner, he was admitted at once without question. Perhaps the younger members of the jury, to whom the proceedings were becoming irksomely thoughtful, hailed him as a relief.

For he was not, certainly, an imposing figure. Short and stout, with a square face, sunburned into a preternatural redness, clad in a loose duck jumper and trousers streaked and splashed with red soil, his aspect under any circumstances would have been quaint, and was now even ridiculous. As he stooped to deposit at his feet a heavy carpetbag he was carrying, it became obvious, from partially developed legends and inscriptions, that the material with which his trousers had been patched had been originally intended for a less ambitious covering. Yet he advanced with great gravity, and after having shaken the hand of each person in the room with labored cordiality, he wiped his serious, perplexed face on a red bandanna handkerchief, a shade lighter than his complexion, laid his powerful hand upon the table to steady himself, and addressed the Judge.

"I was passin' by," he began, by way of apology, "and I thought I'd just step in and see how things was gittin' on with Tennessee thar—my pardner. It's a hot night. I disremember any sich weather before on the Bar." He paused a moment, but nobody volunteering any other meteorological recollection, he again had recourse to his pocket handkerchief, and for some moments mopped his face diligently.

"Have you anything to say in behalf of the prisoner?" said the Judge, finally.

"Thet's it," said Tennessee's Partner, in a tone of relief. "I come yar as Tennessee's pardner, knowing him nigh on four years, off and on, wet and dry, in luck and out o' luck. His ways ain't allers my ways, but thar ain't any p'ints in that young man, thar ain't any liveliness as he's been up to, as I don't know. And you sez to me, sez you—confidential-like, and between man

and man—sez you, 'Do you know anything in his behalf?' and I sez to you, sez I—confidential-like, as between man and man—'What should a man know of his pardner?' "

"Is this all you have to say?" asked the Judge impatiently, feeling, perhaps, that a dangerous sympathy of humor was beginning to humanize the Court.

"Thet's so," continued Tennessee's Partner. "It ain't for me to say anything agin' him. And now, what's the case? Here's Tennessee wants money, wants it bad, and doesn't like to ask it of his old pardner. Well, what does Tennessee do? He lays for a stranger, and he fetches that stranger. And you lays for *him,* and you fetches *him;* and the honors is easy. And I put it to you, bein' a far-minded man, and to you, gentlemen, all, as far-minded men, ef this isn't so."

"Prisoner," said the Judge, interrupting, "have you any questions to ask this man?"

"No! No!" continued Tennessee's Partner hastily. "I play this yer hand alone. To come down to bedrock, it's just this: Tennessee, thar, has played it pretty rough and expensive-like on a stranger, and on this yer camp. And now, what's the fair thing? Some would say more; some would say less. Here's seventeen hundred dollars in coarse gold and a watch—it's about all my pile—and call it square!" And before a hand could be raised to prevent him, he had emptied the contents of the carpetbag upon the table.

For a moment his life was in jeopardy. One or two men sprang to their feet, several hands groped for hidden weapons, and a suggestion to "throw him from the window" was only overridden by a gesture from the Judge. Tennessee laughed. And apparently oblivious of the excitement, Tennessee's Partner improved the opportunity to mop his face again with his handkerchief.

When order was restored, and the man was made to understand, by the use of forcible figures and rhetoric, that Tennessee's offense could not be condoned by money, his face took a more serious and sanguinary hue, and those who were nearest to him noticed that his rough hand trembled slightly on the table. He hesitated a moment as he slowly returned the gold to the carpetbag, as if he had not yet entirely caught the elevated sense of justice which swayed the tribunal, and was perplexed with the belief that he had not offered enough. Then he turned to the Judge, and saying, "This yer is a lone hand, played alone, and without a pardner," he bowed to the jury and was about to withdraw, when the Judge called him back.

"If you have anything to say to Tennessee, you had better say it now."

For the first time that evening the eyes of the prisoner and his strange advocate met. Tennessee smiled, showed his white teeth, and, saying, "Euchred, old man!" held out his hand.

Tennessee's Partner took it in his own, and saying, "I just dropped in as I was passin' to see how things were gettin' on," let the hand passively fall, and adding that "it was a warm night," again mopped his face with his handkerchief, and without a word withdrew.

The two men never again met each other alive. For the unparalleled insult of a bribe offered to Judge Lynch—who, whether bigoted, weak, or narrow, was at least incorruptible—firmly fixed in the mind of that mythical personage any wavering determination of Tennessee's fate; and at the break of day he was marched, closely guarded, to meet it at the top of Marley's Hill.

How he met it, how cool he was, how he refused to say anything, how perfect were the arrangements of the committee, were all duly reported, with the addition of a warning moral and example to all future evil-doers, in the Red Dog *Clarion,* by its editor, who was present, and to whose vigorous English I cheerfully refer the reader. But the beauty of that midsummer morning, the blessed amity of earth and air and sky, the awakened life of the free woods and hills, the joyous renewal and promise of nature, and above all, the infinite serenity that thrilled through each, was not reported, as not being a part of the social lesson. And yet, when the weak and foolish deed was done, and a life, with its possibilities and responsibilities, had passed out of the misshapen thing that dangled between earth and sky, the birds sang, the flowers bloomed, the sun shone, as cheerily as before; and possibly the Red Dog *Clarion* was right.

Tennessee's Partner was not in the group that surrounded the ominous tree. But as they turned to disperse attention was drawn to the singular appearance of a motionless donkey cart halted at the side of the road. As they approached, they at once recognized the venerable "Jenny" and the two-wheeled cart as the property of Tennessee's Partner, used by him in carrying dirt from his claim; and a few paces distant the owner of the equipage himself, sitting under a buckeye tree, wiping the perspiration from his glowing face.

In answer to an inquiry, he said he had come for the body of the "diseased," if it was all the same to the committee. He didn't wish

to hurry anything; he could wait. He was not working that day; and when the gentlemen were done with the "diseased," he would take him. "Ef thar is any present," he added, in his simple, serious way, "as would care to jine in the fun'l, they kin come." Perhaps it was from a sense of humor, which I have already intimated was a feature of Sandy Bar—perhaps it was from something even better than that; but two-thirds of the loungers accepted the invitation at once.

It was noon when the body of Tennessee was delivered into the hands of his partner. As the cart drew up to the fatal tree, we noticed that it contained a rough, oblong box, apparently made from a section of sluicing, and half filled with bark and the tassels of pine. The cart was further decorated with slips of willow, and made fragrant with buckeye blossoms.

When the body was deposited in the box, Tennessee's Partner drew over it a piece of tarred canvas, and gravely mounting the narrow seat in front, with his feet upon the shafts, urged the little donkey forward. The equipage moved slowly on, at that decorous pace which was habitual with Jenny even under less solemn circumstances.

The men—half curiously, half jestingly, but all good-humoredly—strolled along beside the cart; some in advance, some a little in the rear of the homely catafalque. But, whether from the narrowing of the road or some present sense of decorum, as the cart passed on, the company fell to the rear in couples, keeping step, and otherwise assuming the external show of a formal procession. Jack Folinsbee, who had at the outset played a funeral march in dumb show upon an imaginary trombone, desisted, from a lack of sympathy and appreciation—not having, perhaps, your true humorist's capacity to be content with the enjoyment of his own fun.

The way led through Grizzly Canyon, by this time clothed in funereal drapery and shadows. The redwoods, burying their moccasined feet in the red soil, stood in Indian file along the track, trailing an uncouth benediction from their bending boughs upon the passing bier. A hare, surprised into helpless inactivity, sat upright and pulsating in the ferns by the roadside, as the cortege went by. Squirrels hastened to gain a secure outlook from higher boughs; and the bluejays, spreading their wings, fluttered before them like outriders, until the outskirts of Sandy Bar were reached, and the solitary cabin of Tennessee's Partner.

Viewed under more favorable circumstances, it would not have been a cheerful place. The unpicturesque site, the rude and unlove-

ly outlines, the unsavory details, which distinguish the nest-building of the California miner, were all here, with the dreariness of decay superadded. A few paces from the cabin there was a rough enclosure, which, in the brief days of Tennessee's Partner's matrimonial felicity, had been used as a garden, but was now overgrown with fern. As we approached it we were surprised to find that what we had taken for a recent attempt at cultivation was the broken soil about an open grave.

The cart was halted before the enclosure; and rejecting the offers of assistance with the same air of simple self-reliance he had displayed throughout, Tennessee's Partner lifted the rough coffin on his back, and deposited it, unaided, within the shallow grave. He then nailed down the board which served as a lid; and mounting the little mound of earth beside it, took off his hat, and slowly mopped his face with his handkerchief. This the crowd felt was a preliminary to speech; and they disposed themselves variously on stumps and boulders, and sat expectant.

"When a man," began Tennessee's Partner slowly, "has been running free all day, what's the natural thing for him to do? Why, to come home. And if he ain't in a condition to go home what can his best friend do? Why, bring him home! And here's Tennessee has been running free, and we bring him home from his wandering." He paused, and picked up a fragment of quartz, rubbed it thoughtfully on his sleeve, and went on: "It ain't the first time that I've packed him on my back, as you see'd me now. It ain't the first time that I brought him to this yer cabin when he couldn't help himself; it ain't the first time that I and Jinny have waited for him on yon hill, and picked him up and so fetched him home, when he couldn't speak, and didn't know me. And now that it's the last time, why—" he paused, and rubbed the quartz gently on his sleeve "—you see it's sort of rough on his pardner. And now, gentlemen," he added abruptly, picking up his long-handled shovel, "the fun'l's over; and my thanks, and Tennessee's thanks, to you for your trouble."

Resisting any proffers of assistance, he began to fill in the grave, turning his back upon the crowd, that after a few moments' hesitation gradually withdrew. As they crossed the little ridge that hid Sandy Bar from view, some, looking back, thought they could see Tennessee's Partner, his work done, sitting upon the grave, his shovel between his knees, and his face buried in his red bandanna handkerchief. But it was argued by others that you couldn't tell his

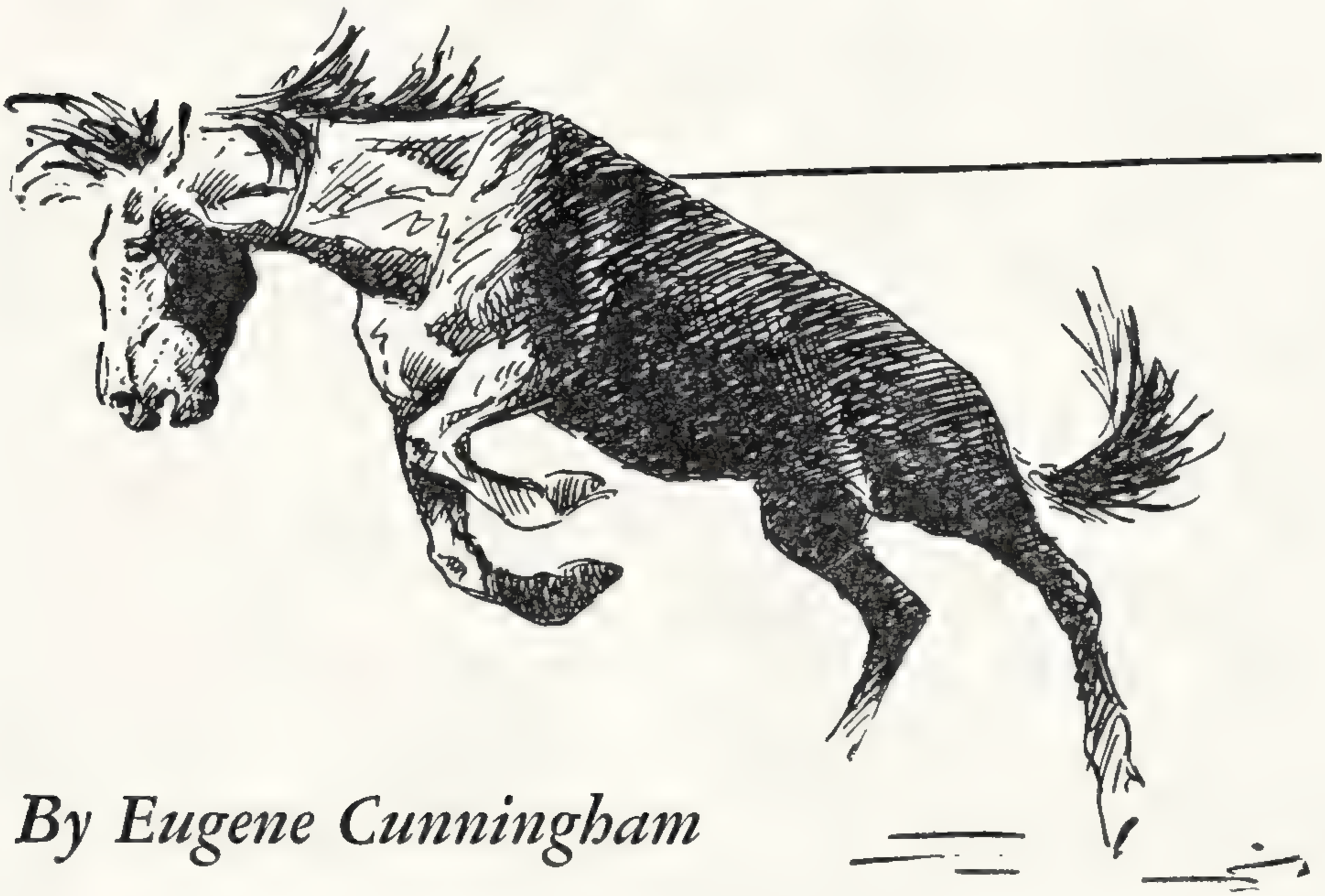
face from his handkerchief at that distance; and this point remained undecided.

In the reaction that followed the feverish excitement of that day, Tennessee's Partner was not forgotten. A secret investigation had cleared him of any complicity in Tennessee's guilt, and left only a suspicion of his general sanity. Sandy Bar made a point of calling on him, and proffering various uncouth but well-meant kindnesses. But from that day his rude health and great strength seemed visibly to decline; and when the rainy season fairly set in, and the tiny grass-blades were beginning to peep from the rocky mound above Tennessee's grave, he took to his bed.

One night, when the pines beside the cabin were swaying in the storm, and trailing their slender fingers over the roof, and the roar and rush of the swollen river were heard below, Tennessee's Partner lifted his head from his pillow, saying, "It is time to go for Tennessee; I must put Jinny in the cart"; and would have risen from his bed but for the restraint of his attendant. Struggling, he still pursued his singular fancy: "There, now, steady, Jinny—steady, old girl. How dark it is! Look out for the ruts—and look out for him, too, old gal. Sometimes, you know, when he's blind drunk, he drops down right in the trail. Keep on straight up to the pine on the top of the hill. Thar—I told you so!—thar he is,—coming this way, too—all by himself, sober, and his face a-shining. Tennessee! Pardner!"

And so they met.

BEGINNERS'



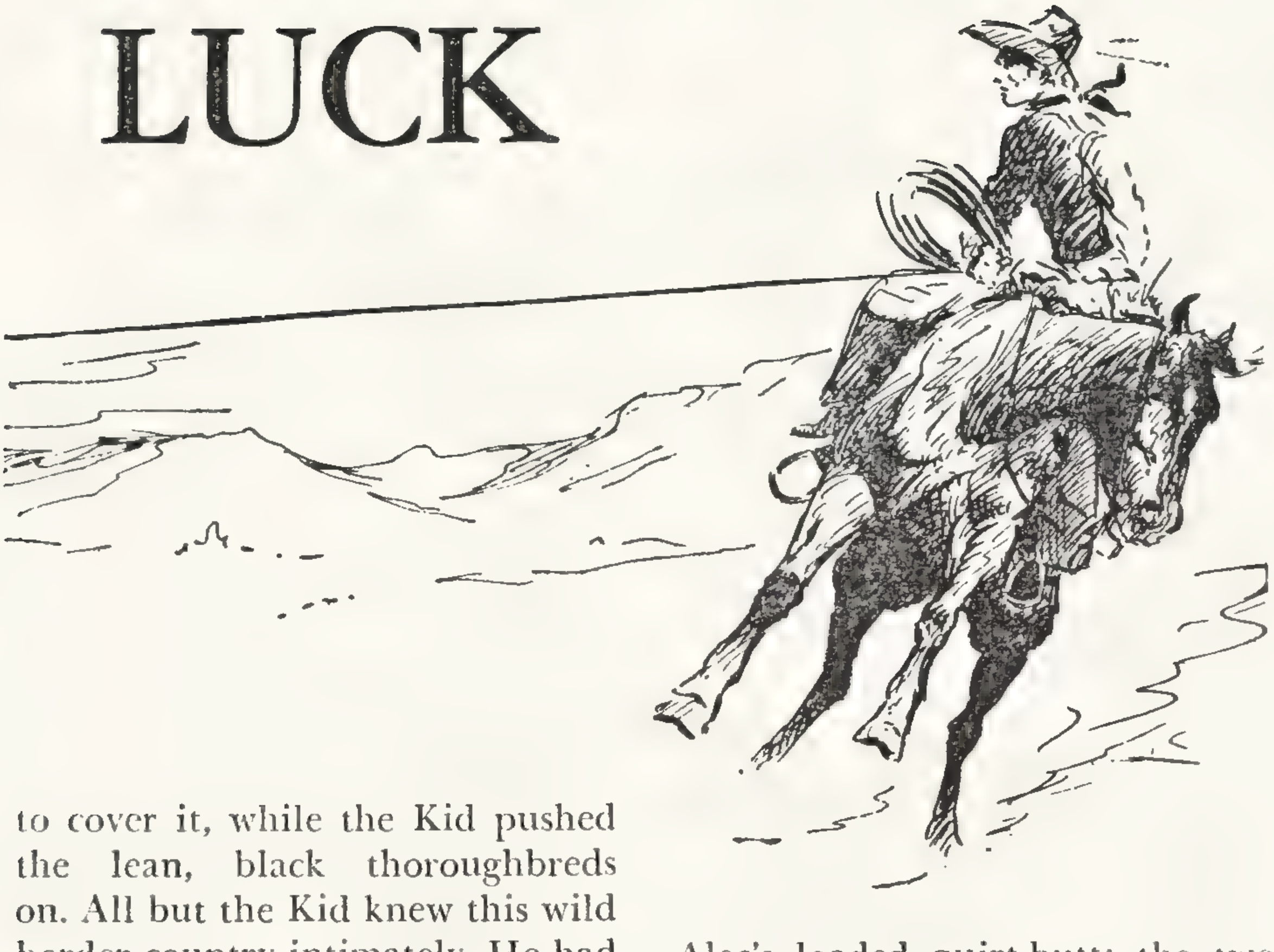
By Eugene Cunningham

WARE'S KID *lacks experience, but he has hopes that with a little under his belt he can prove to the Rangers that he might be a worthy recruit in their famous ranks. This yarn, which appeared first in* Frontier Stories *some two decades ago. tells just how the Kid's hopes worked out.*

THE gang pounded south through the Crazies by way of Dead Man's Gap, pushing the stolen Swayn thoroughbreds hard down the canyon. "Black Alec" Rawles rode point. The Kid, in the rear, kept the band from breaking back toward home, while Charro Joe and the Chink, covering the flanks, watched both the horses and Myra Swayn, who rode among them with hands lashed to the saddle-horn.

When a side-canyon loomed ahead Black Alec whooped to the flank-riders and they loped ahead

LUCK



to cover it, while the Kid pushed the lean, black thoroughbreds on. All but the Kid knew this wild border country intimately. He had been picked up down on the desert after the raid, a shambling, overall-clad, 17-year-old vagrant of a cowhand.

Black Alec had thought another rider would be useful in shepherding Old Man Swayn's beloved horses across the river to Mendoza's "revolutionary" camp. So they gave the silent, incurious-seeming boy a wiry buckskin to replace his decrepit mount and he went to work as for wages, with no show of any emotion upon his brown face.

He had not seen Old Man Swayn hammered senseless to the earth of his dooryard by Black Alec's loaded quirt-butt; the two Triangle Bar punchers shot dead in the bunkhouse-door by the Chink and Charro Joe; or Myra Swayn roped to a horse while the famous thoroughbred herd—which Mendoza, "The Broom," so coveted—was gathered. But the curt talk of the Chink and Charro Joe told him as much of that as he could have known had he been with them from their start south of the river.

What he thought of it all the others never inquired, nor did his smooth face tell anything of his thoughts. He asked no questions about the gang's destination; expressed no curiosity of any sort re-

garding his profit from the venture.

Toward four in the evening, Black Alec suddenly wheeled his horse and blocked the canyon. The band stopped, milling nervously. In its van the great black stallion watched the man. It was the stallion's fame which had caused the raid, for word of him had gone up and down the Crazy Mountain country; out upon the yellow deserts; across the river to where Mendoza headquartered while he blew up trains, raided ranches on both sides of the river and thumbed his nose at federals' clumsy, futile efforts to capture him. Two thousand pesos Mendoza had offered for the stallion; 1,000 pesos for any animal from Old Man Swayn's beloved herd.

The Kid whooped shrilly in the band's rear and the black stallion swerved down the narrow, tortuous side-canyon, his harem and the two colts following. Black Alec waited for his followers, a gaunt slouching figure, black-bearded to his snaky, opaque eyes.

"Them dam' Rangers is easy twenty mile behind, I 'low," he grunted to Charro Joe and the Chink. "Hadn't been for yuh-all lettin' that Mex' kid git away, at the ranch, they wouldn't have knowed nothin' about us till we had the hawsses over the river an' got the money from Mendoza. Cap'n Reno's hell, too! But the Mex' kid had ten mile to ride an' the Rangers had ten mile to come back. They don't know nothin' about this-yere side-canyon, neither. Me'n old Enriquez was the only ones knowed he had a cabin in it. We'll smooth up a little yere, an' they'll go hellin' on by to take that short-cut fork to the river. We'll rest up at the cabin an' then, 'bout three in the mawnin', we'll sa'nter out an' head west a piece. We'll hit the river ten-fifteen mile from whar they'll likely be a-waitin' fer us.

"Charro, yuh take this old shoe an' ramble on down the main canyon couple mile. Drop it in the trail like as if the stallion cast it, see? Then come on back an' smooth things up around yere. Good thing the canyon's got a rock bottom! They can't tell if fifty hawsses—or none 't all—is ahead of 'em."

"*'Star bueno!*" nodded Charro Joe. His weasel-face twisted in a sinister, one-sided grin. "I'm fix them shoe so them dam' Ranger, she's think she's *see* them stallion drop him!" He spurred off, riding as only a Mexican can.

Black Alec, with the stolid Chink and the Kid trailing, followed the band to where, six or seven miles from its beginning, the side-canyon ended in a grassy park of perhaps two acres. It was a blind canyon; the tiny spring, the grass, made it ideal for their purpose, but it had the disadvantage that from

end to end of it the high, sheer walls were unscalable even by a man afoot.

Myra Swayn's mount had halted with the other animals near the little, half-ruined stone cabin. The Chink swung down and unsaddled; the others followed suit. Black Alec went over to the girl and stood for a moment staring up evilly into her white, set face, for which the widened, fearful blue eyes seemed all too large. She was only 16 or so. Suddenly Black Alec grinned and loosed the rope that shackled her ankles together and that which held her wrists tight to the saddlehorn.

She toppled sideways into his arms and he carried her up to the cabin. When he halted to set her down, he laid his bearded face in a bear-like caress against hers. When she jerked against his arms and made little despairing noises in her throat, the Kid saw his shambling body shake with silent laughter. The Kid watched with his habitual lack of expression; the Chink's blank yellow face was unaltered, but into his slanting, lashless eyes leaped a sudden reddish light.

While the Chink fried bacon and made coffee and the Kid brought more firewood, Charro Joe rode back and unsaddled. He threw his hull down against the cabin wall and started to take the Winchester from the saddle-scabbard, but the girl moved slightly—Black Alec had tied her hands and feet again—and he left the carbine to come and stare down at her. Black Alec squatted in the cabin doorway, smoking; he paid no attention to the Mexican. But the Kid, sitting upon his ancient, battered saddle halfway across the canyon, saw Charro Joe's hands suddenly tremble and clench hard, saw how he lifted his head a little to eye Black Alec furtively. Then he moved on and sat staring broodingly at the ground.

They ate in complete silence. Black Alec loosed the girl's hands and set a piece of wrapping paper before her on the ground, with a meager meal of fried bacon, cold black beans and leathery *tortillas* upon it. Charro Joe and the Chink watched him, eyed each other sidelong, seemed to come to some mutually satisfactory understanding and again turned their eyes toward Black Alec.

"Por Dios!" cried Charro Joe suddenly, with his sinister, one-sided grin. "She's one good time, *si!* Seven *caballos* an' them dam' stallion. Mendoza, she's pay us nine thousan' *pesos,* an' them ol' man, she's have three thousan' dollar in *la casa.* Fifteen thousan' *peso;* five thousan' *peso* for Black Alec, for them Chink, for Charro Joe. Ho! An' las' year, this time, me, I'm dig

them rock in them chain-gang at El Paso!"

Neither Black Alec nor the Chink made any reply. But Charro Joe had a definite purpose in talking—as the Chink's lidless, smoldering eyes seemed to see. He leaned back against the cabin wall and rolled a cornshuck cigarette of inky tobacco, lit it and inhaled an enormous cloud of smoke. His slender right hand was upon his knee; he lifted his head a little and laughed thinly. "Five thousan' *peso*. But, *por Dios!* I'm forget them girl! How we're divide one girl for three?"

"Don't yuh be worryin' about that," Black Alec drawled ominously. "The girl, she's mine."

"So-o?" Charro Joe's eyes flashed to the Chink, then sinisterly to Black Alec. "So-o? Now, me—an' them Chink—we're think she don't go like that. Ever'thing w'at we're got, she's divide for three."

Suddenly the hand upon his knee held a knife—held it delicately by the point. The Chink's hand, also, had been armed with legerdemain as flashing. Either of them could impale a cigarette-paper at twenty feet, as Black Alec knew from observation. So he sat motionless. His hands were close to Colt-butts; men along the border called him amazingly fast on the draw, a marksman with either hand. But now those knives would be hurled into his throat while his fingers curled about Colt-butts. Kill them both, he could—he felt sure of that; but it would be while dying. He was equally sure of that. He decided to temporize.

"I brung her along. Yuh-all never would've done it," he grumbled. "But if yuh want to start a row about her, here's whut I'll do: two thousand *pesos* o' my share fer her. Yuh-all can split it a thousand apiece. If that ain't fair—"

"Not five thousan' *peso!*" cried Charro Joe. "No, *amigo!* Me, I'm not take five thousan'."

Slowly, but with infinite emphasis, the Chink nodded agreement with this.

"Well, then, s'pose we-all plays poker for her!"

"Play poker weeth Black Alec?" The Chink spoke for the first time and his scornful question was full reply.

"We shoot them craps!" cried Charro Joe. "Me, I'm got them dice."

"*No sabe* craps!" Now the Chink eyed Charro Joe suspiciously.

"W'y, she's ver' simple! Mos' luck. *Por Dios,* Chink! S'pose you never play him, you're mabbe have them beginners' luck!"

He spread a saddle-blanket on the earthen floor of the cabin, near the fire. The twilight was fading; the Chink threw more wood on the fire and red, flickering glares

dappled the red-and-gray Navajo.

Charro Joe produced a pair of cheap, red celluloid dice and rolled them across the blanket. "Ho! come 'long them seven!" he cried.

"Hell! Might's well make it interestin'!" grunted Black Alec. "Let's figure the girl's worth three thousand *pesos*—thousand apiece. That'll make each share six thousand *pesos*. Each one o' us'll take sixty matches, each match bein' a hundred-peso chip. We'll shoot fer the whole works. But we'll shoot fer the girl, first. Mebbe the feller that wins her'll want to put her up ag'in."

They nodded assent, Charro Joe with one-sided grin, the Chink suspiciously. They explained to the Chink the rules of the great game of craps. They would "peewee" for possession of the dice for first roll, "ace high, low shoot." Charro Joe demonstrated the peewee roll with a die, and the Chink nodded.

Then there came the dull expressionless voice of the Kid from behind the tense, watchful trio. "Where do I come in on this, misters?" he asked. "Mebbe I got some o' this beginners' luck a-comin'; I never shot craps."

They whirled upon him, startled by his noiseless approach, by his unusual display of interest, his altogether odd departure from the dull taciturnity they had come to expect from him.

"Goddam!" snarled the Chink ferociously. "I'm cut'm heart out!"

But Black Alec caught his wrist. With left hand he held the knife-hand motionless, while his own right hand flicked up. The heavy quirt that hung to his wrist—the quirt which had pounded Old Man Swayn down and down in his door-yard—leaped up like a rattler's length to wrap clear around the Kid's head. He staggered, but was upheld by the tension Black Alec kept upon the quirt-lash. When it was jerked free the Kid reeled backward with an inch-wide crimson welt upon his face.

He was unarmed. Nothing more than a barehanded attack could be expected from him. Yet Black Alec, even while he swung the quirt to and fro, kept left hand at gun-butt, as if doubtful whether to kill or quirt him, if he moved.

But the Kid only raised his hand to his welted face. " 'Scuse me, misters!" he mumbled.

"Listen! Yuh git back an' herd them hawsses. Let 'em feed up an' down. If one of 'em looks like he wanted to break down-canyon I'll turn yuh over to the Chink yere. He'll cut your dam' heart out an' show it to yuh! Watch that dam' girl, too. If she starts anything, call me, *pronto!*"

The Kid backed off into the darkness. They stood staring after him, the Chink still malevolently snarl-

ing of face, Charro Joe grinning his sinister, one-sided grin. From the darkness came an odd, gasping sound. It was not repeated.

Charro Joe's grin climbed a little. *"Por Dios!* He's cry! W'at the hell!" he jeered.

From rim to floor the canyon was now filled with almost palpable darkness. Far, incredibly far, above, a myriad stars, softly yellow, luminous as topazes, spangled the blue-black sky-dome. Ten feet away the cabin doorway became a vignetted, ruddy glow that seemed to hang in the dull-white expanse of wall. The shape of it altered from moment to moment as the firelight flickered or the men inside moved. The girl—motionless as if dead—was but a log-like bulk along the outside of the wall.

"Ho!" came Charro Joe's thin voice from the cabin. "Them Chink, she's have them beginners' luck, *si!* She's get them dice. Now, Chink, you're roll them dice an' pray for them natural. But, first, you're put up w'at you're want to shoot. Three hundred *peso,* w'at? *Bueno!* Me, I'm make two hundred, an' Black Alec, she's cover one hundred."

The girl shuddered. She had heard all the details of the gambling arrangement. She was struggling silently but furiously against the pliant rawhide that pinioned her wrists together and shackled them to the loops about her ankles. Suddenly she felt eyes regarding her. She turned awkwardly, to stare up with dilated eyes. The flickering light from the door shone upon one side of the Kid's face as he looked down upon her. It turned his bronzed face into copper; made it seem hard, inhumanly set, like a statue's. She found no hope of aid there.

The Kid moved off as noiselessly as he had come. Presently the horses moved a little; the girl saw their black shapes and heard the muffled snorting as they grazed.

From the cabin Charro Joe's voice sounded again; this time the Mex's laugh held little of mirth. *"Por Dios!* One more natural! Them beginners' luck, she's look —not—so—much—like—them—beginners'—"

"Cover him, Charro," grunted Black Alec. "I'm goin' to take a look at them hawsses."

He appeared in the doorway, to stand staring across the canyon at the horse-band. Something moved in the darkness at the girl's feet; she sensed, rather than saw or heard it.

Black Alec's animal-keen ears caught some tiny, rasping sound. He whirled, automatically half-drawing his Colts; fell into the catlike crouch of the gunman. "Kid!" he snarled. "Kid! Whar yuh? Dam' your soul, I'll—"

A moment of silence; then from the horse-band across the canyon came the Kid's flat voice. "Yes, sir, mister! I'm watchin' the hawsses."

Black Alec grunted. He shoved the guns back into their holsters and came past the girl. She shrank away against the wall, but he went on and fumbled with his saddle. When he came back he halted in the light of the door, teeth glinting in the tangle of black beard. Upon his palm were two red cubes; he held them in his cupped hand, close to his ear, rattling them. All the while he grinned. "Beginners' luck!" he said softly. "Beginners' luck. Well—mebbe—" He went inside.

Charro Joe was cursing steadily, now, in a spitting, catlike monotone. *"Por amor de Dios!"* he spat out a triumphant oath. "She's time! Me, I'm lose eight hundred *peso* to them dam' Chink! Give to me them dice!"

So noiselessly, so abruptly, that she almost screamed, breath was upon the girl's cheek. "Gal, will yuh go 'long with me?" a voice was whispering in her ear. "Yuh got to do what I say, now!"

A knife-blade touched her wrists and the rawhide fell away; touched her ankles and she was free. Roughly he chafed her wrists. She sat up and tried to stare at him, but the darkness was a curtain between them. Inside sounded the thud of the dice upon the Navajo blanket and Charro Joe's steady cursing. She shivered at thought of those three villainous faces, intent upon the roll of the dice that would finally tell whose property she became. Sudden panic possessed her —panic that made this other one, here, seem almost a protector; seem a desirable alternative.

Flashingly she tried to recall more of the detail of him. He had been only a slender, dust-coated shape during the day, glimpsed at intervals when despairingly she turned to see if rescue showed on the back-trail. Not much to build a picture on, but of the four she preferred to go with him since go she must. She rose and caught at his arm. He let her cling to it as they moved toward where the horses pawed and snorted.

The horses moved a little at their approach—all but two. The Kid pulled free of her, then stooped to loose the picket-ropes that held these. Apparently, she thought, he had counted upon her willingness to go with him, rather than remain with that gang. Or perhaps he had intended to carry her off anyway. He gave her a foot up into a saddle and himself flashed upon his mount without touching stirrups. They were 30, 40 yards from the door now.

Suddenly the firelight was blocked by a man's figure. "Hey,

Kid!" Charro Joe called. "W'ere you are?"

"Here, mister! Just watchin' the hawsses!"

But the girl heard again, beside her, that odd, gasping sound the Kid had made as he moved off after taking Black Alec's quirt across his face. This time she recognized it as laughter.

"*'Star bueno!*" nodded Charro Joe. Then he turned easily toward where the girl had lain. "Them girl! Black Alec! Chink!" he shrilled. He ran a few steps in the direction of the silent pair. He had jerked his gun, now; he leaned forward to stare this way and that.

A rifle exploded almost in the girl's ear; she shut her eyes instinctively and opened them to see Charro Joe running desperately toward the cabin door. "You missed him!" she cried angrily, then was furious at the partisan-interest that had leaped up in her for this strange figure beside her.

"Not with a rifle," he answered calmly. "Come on! Here's where we high-tail it!"

A shrill yell and the horse-band broke down the canyon. A rifle bullet dancing upon the rocks at their heels and they were stampeded. Behind them, Myra Swayn and the Kid rode hell-for-leather in a burst of shots from the cabin.

At the mouth of the side-canyon the band of thoroughbreds whirled north—back toward the Triangle-Bar. With a sudden wild impulse Myra Swayn set spurs to her animal and followed. But of all the band the Kid had chosen to ride the great, black stallion; even in the darkness the girl knew that tall bulk. A hand caught her bridle-reins and both horses slid to a halt. So that chance was gone, she thought, almost resignedly—if it had been a chance. Fifteen miles south was the river.

"Don't yuh be in such a hurry, gal. I got a little talkin' to do," the Kid said. But then he was silent for perhaps two minutes.

She waited, with odd mixture of emotions, of which curiosity was dominant.

"Them hawsses, o' course, will break right for home. Only—they'll meet Rangers. Mebbe that'll scare 'em an' send 'em back this way. Hmm. Well, can't he'p it. Listen, now! Yuh'll pour the quirt into that *caballo*. Yuh'll meet Cap'n Reno an' the Rangers. Yuh'll tell Cap'n that Ware's Kid's squattin' up here, ridin' herd on what's left o' Black Alec's San Simone gang. They got five-six mile to walk an' they can't git out 'cept here—walls too steep. An' they won't git out here!"

"You—you aren't going to take me to Mexico?"

"Hell, no!" he cried earnestly. "What'd I want with yuh? Only

thing I want is to git in the Rangers! That's what I come along with Black Alec fer; what I been workin' fer, all time. There's two vacancies now, but Cap'n Reno told me, other day, there's five hundred after the jobs. Asked me —dern his hide!—who'd I ever fight? An' him an' my pa was Rangers together!" He whirled the black stallion and turned back toward the canyon-mouth.

The girl stared blankly after, then spurred on. She was three or four miles up the main canyon when horses closed in upon her. A hand seized her wrist and she began shouting for Captain Reno. Reno answered amazedly, recognizing her voice. She poured out her story in a torrent of words, but the Ranger grasped the urgent portion after a moment and she was swept around and back toward the waiting Kid, still talking.

They raced on, but long before they could reach the side-canyon a splatter of shots reverberated from the rocky walls. Reno swore viciously and spurred on recklessly. Another burst of shots; then scattered, methodical-seeming shots; finally ominous silence.

"Here it is!" cried the girl, recognizing the mouth of the side-canyon. The Rangers drew rein quickly. As they sat their horses, staring tensely at the black mouth of the canyon, something moved beside a boulder. The shape was covered by four guns in a twinkling.

"Cap'n Reno!" a flat, toneless voice called weakly. "This is the Kid. I— Yuh come too—late. They come a-bustin'—to git out—"

The dim shape crumpled and Reno was off his horse to catch the Kid. He lifted the slight figure from the ground.

"Black Alec an'—the Chink—come a-bustin'. I had to kill 'em. The Chink, he—carved me a little. Nothin' much. Does this—yuh reckon—does this—git me into the Rangers?" Eagerly, forgetting his "carved" shoulder, "Ware's Kid" tried to look up into the captain's twisted face.

"Son," said Reno ferociously, "she shore as all hell do!"

WILD BILL HICKOK *and the* TEXAS BADMAN

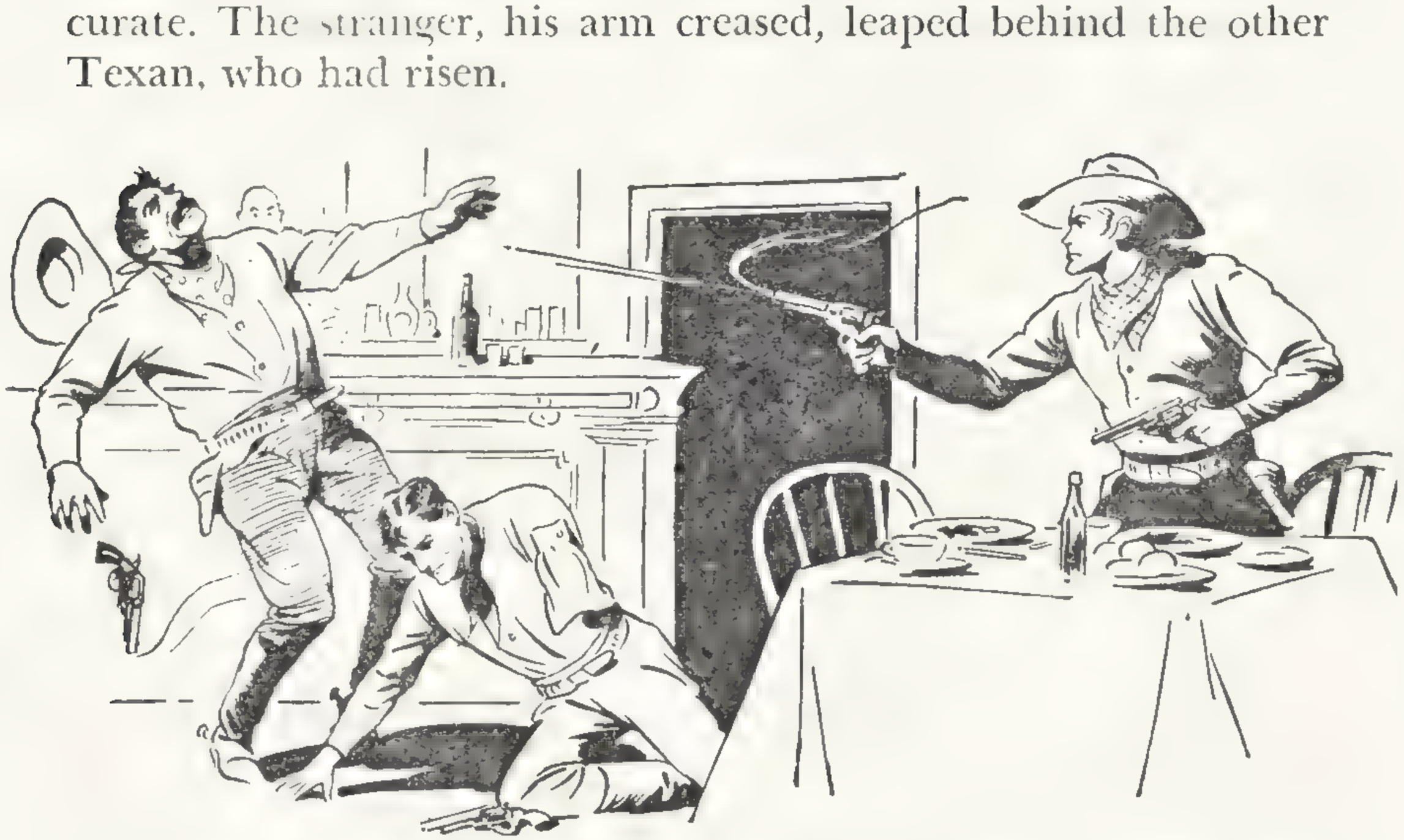
Story by
CARL SMITH

Pictures by
H. E. VALLELY

THIS *thrilling bit of the Old West is based on actual records telling of the time when Wild Bill Hickok, the famous marshal of Abilene, crossed paths with John Wesley Hardin, one of the deadliest gunmen of American frontier history.*

"I kill a Texan every morning before breakfast," the stranger in the Abilene saloon announced. "I kill 'em on general principles—they're a bunch of dirty, yellow horse-thieves, and—" A boy of 19, seated at a table with a friend, rose slowly. "Two from Texas present," he said. "Me and my friend here."

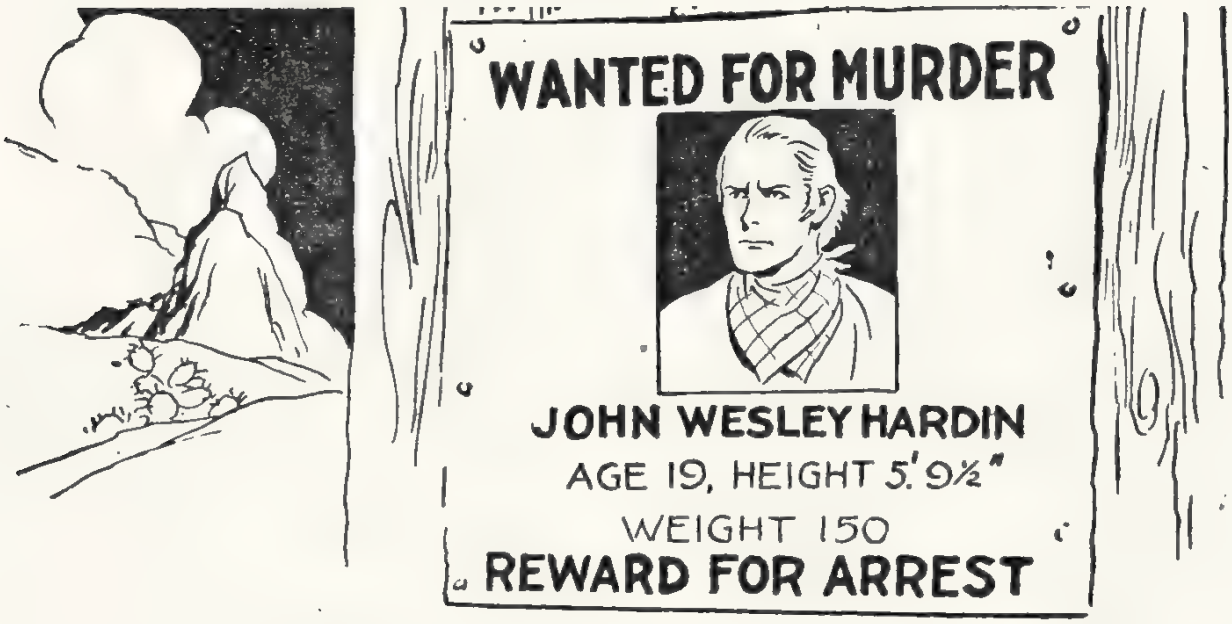
The stranger turned toward the speaker, and his hand dropped to the gun on his hip. Two shots crashed out almost simultaneously, but the young Texan's shooting was faster and more accurate. The stranger, his arm creased, leaped behind the other Texan, who had risen.



Six-shooters blazed again, and the young Texan's friend was wounded. As he dropped to the floor, the stranger started to run. A bullet from the youth's .44 struck him in the mouth and blew out the back of his head. He was dead when he hit the floor, dropped by the Texan's bullet.

The victor ran out, jumped on his horse, and galloped away. It was time to leave town, for this was 1871, when Wild Bill Hickok was enforcing the law in Abilene with a ready six-gun. And less than four hours earlier, Wild Bill had tangled horns with the young Texan.

The 19-year-old six-gun expert was John Wesley Hardin, who later became one of the most notorious killers of the old West. A Texas preacher's son, Jack Hardin killed his first man when he was 15 years old, and during the remainder of his life accounted for at least 35 victims.

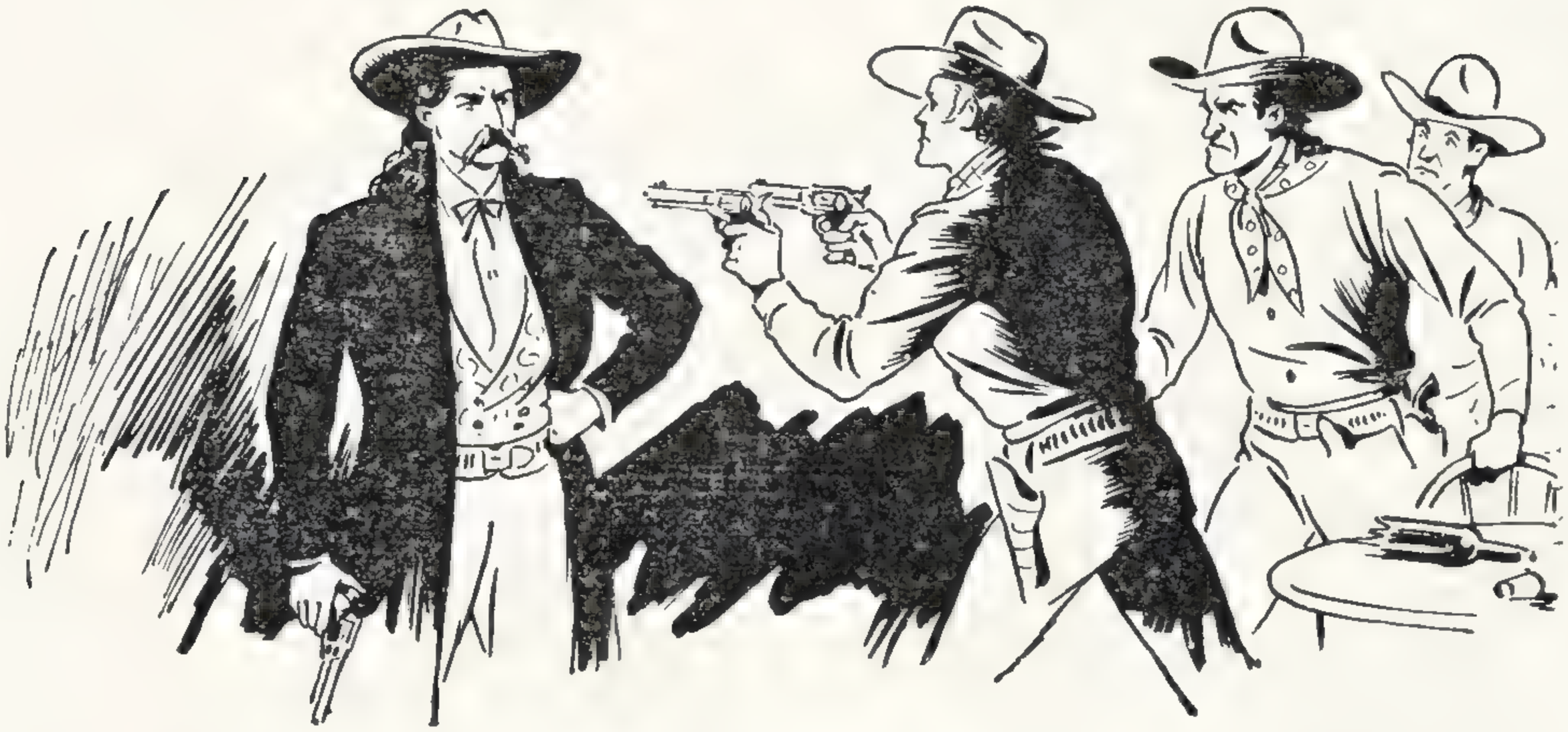


He had arrived in Abilene a few days earlier with a Texas cow outfit which had brought a herd up the trail. Already, at the age of 19, he had 15 notches on his six-gun. Previous to his arrival, Wild Bill Hickok had received a folder from Texas offering a reward for Hardin's arrest.

Instead of arresting young Hardin for the Texas authorities, however, Hickok had merely warned him to stay out of trouble while he was in Abilene. Hardin followed the advice for two days, until he and some friends who were trying to drink the town dry started a disturbance in a saloon.

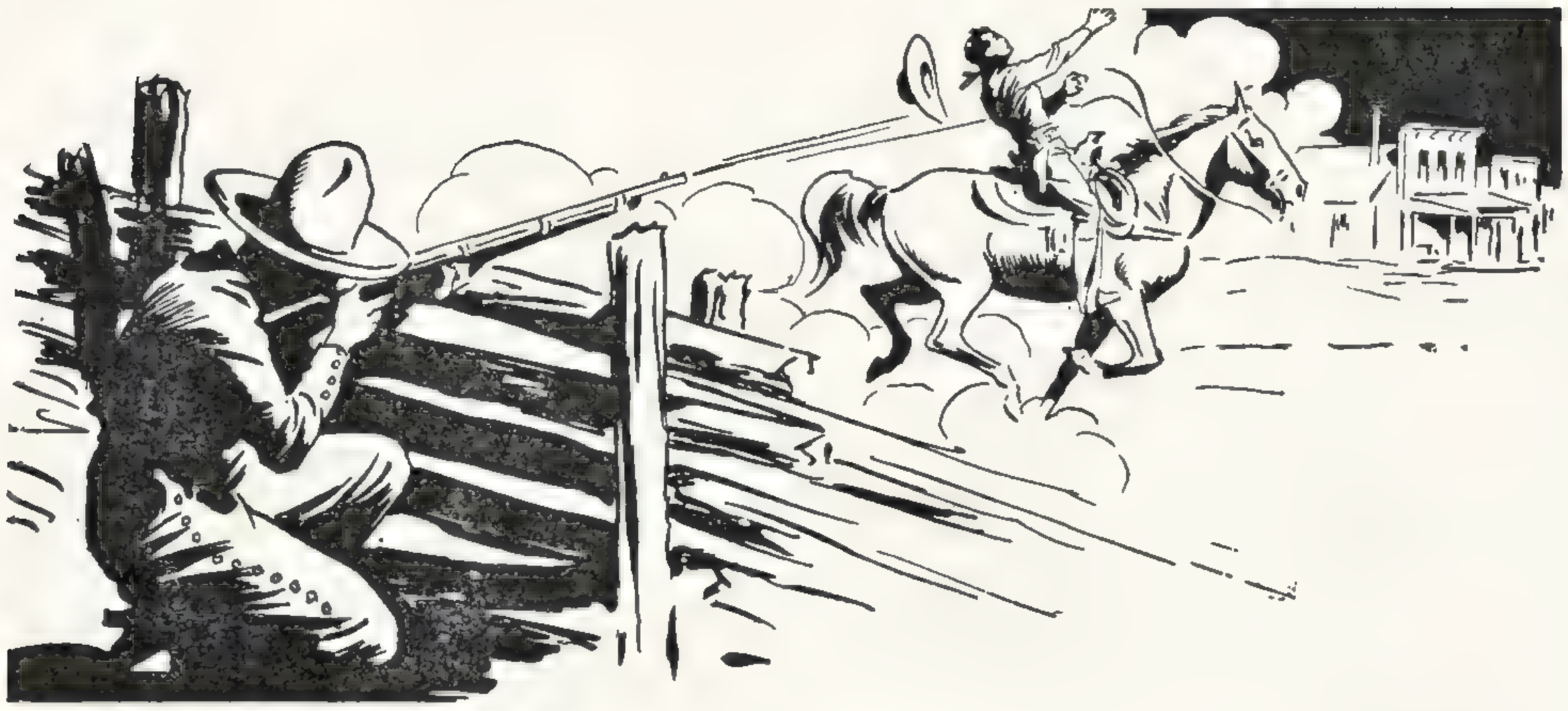
Wild Bill came into the saloon to quell the disturbance, and ordered Hardin to take his guns off and leave them off as long as he stayed in Abilene. Amiably, Hardin took his pair of six-guns out of their holsters and offered them, butts foremost, to Marshal Hickok.

But as Hickok advanced to take the guns, unwarily dropping his own Colt slightly, Hardin suddenly whirled his .44's, reversing them in his hands, and the famous marshal of Abilene found himself looking into a pair of muzzles where the butts of the guns had been a second before.



It was probably the only time in Wild Bill Hickok's life that anyone got the drop on him. This trick, known as "the roll" and later used widely, was invented by Hardin, and Wild Bill had never encountered it before. Then he quietly talked Hardin into putting up his guns.

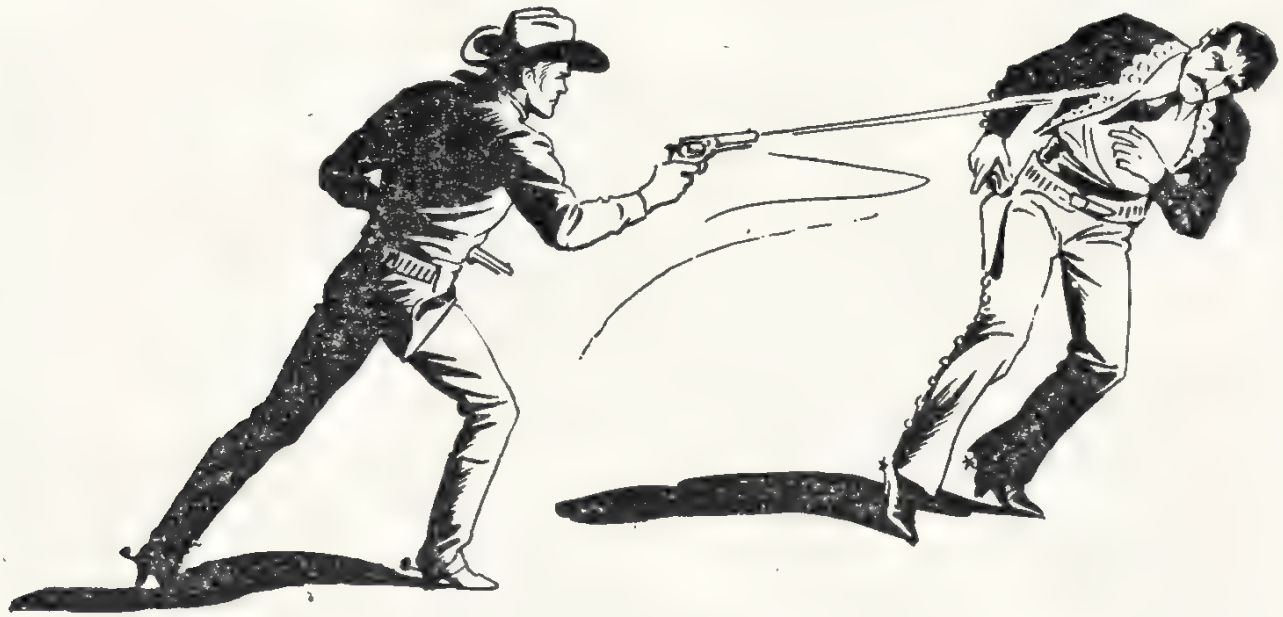
Wild Bill took the young desperado into a back room and talked to him like a Dutch uncle. He learned that a gambler who wanted him killed—but didn't dare try it himself—had convinced Hardin that Hickok intended to shoot him in the back. They were friends when they left the room.



It was later that same day when Hardin shot the man in the saloon. Hardin, gunman though he was, didn't want to answer to Hickok for the killing. He was in hiding a few miles west of Abilene a day or two later, when a Mexican named Bideno bushwhacked one of the boys in Hardin's outfit.

Two posses failed to capture Bideno, and the cattlemen persuaded the sheriff of the county to deputize Hardin. Accompanied by a friend, Hardin took the trail and followed Bideno west to Wichita, then south toward Indian Territory, which was then a favorite refuge for outlaws.

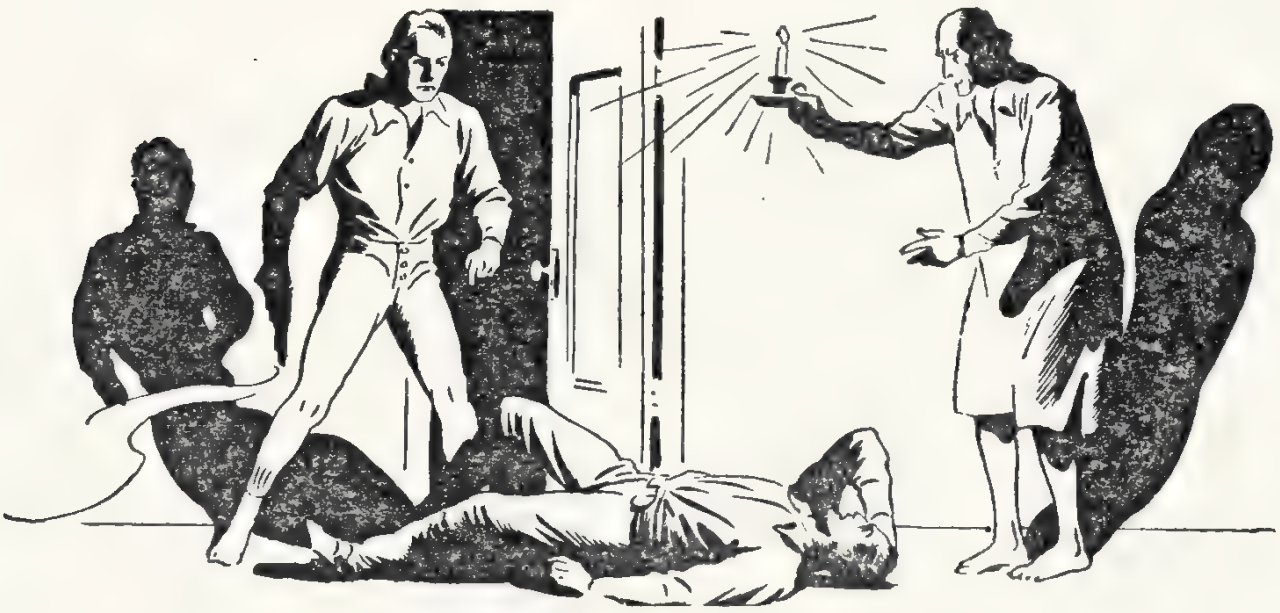
Hardin caught up with Bideno at Bluff Creek, only a few miles from Indian Territory. He learned that Bideno was eating dinner in the saloon. Walking in alone, he found his quarry seated at a table. Hardin ordered him to surrender, but Bideno went for his gun instead.



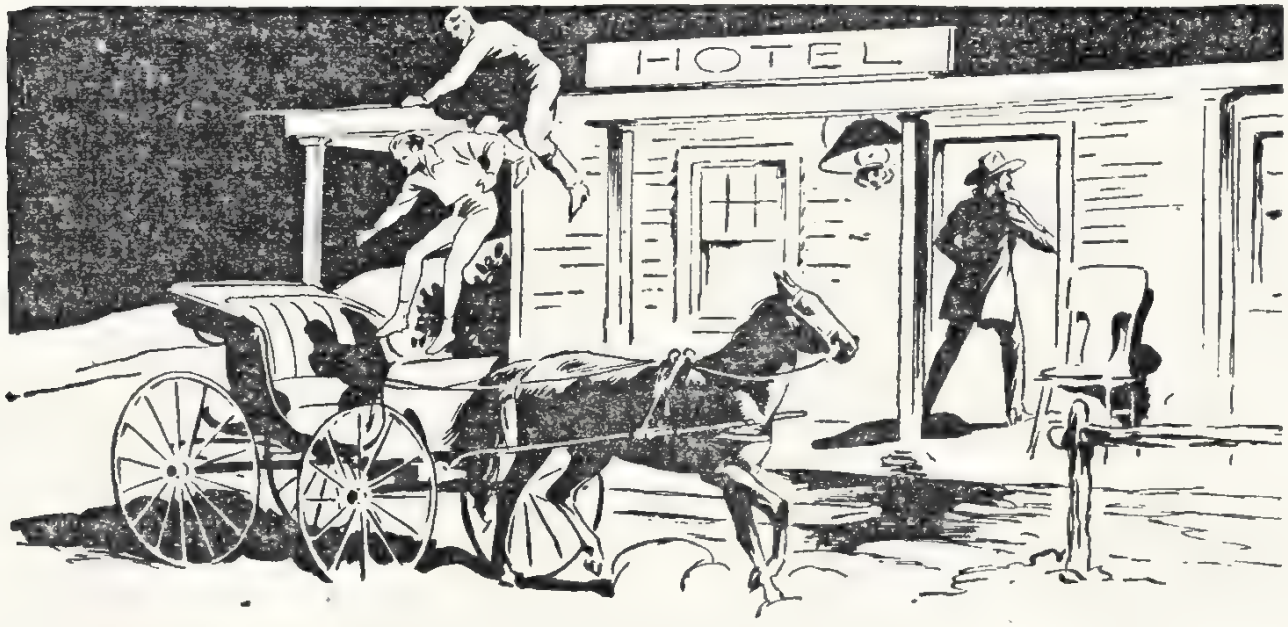
Only one shot was fired. Bideno fell with a bullet in his forehead, squarely between the eyes—dead before he could fire his own gun. Hardin, feeling that he had squared himself with the authorities in Abilene by this act, returned to the town openly, in no fear of trouble with the law.

The cattlemen of Abilene threw a party in Hardin's honor and gave him a purse of $1000 for tracking down Bideno. In the midst of the festivities, Hickok appeared. He walked up to the young gunman. "Are you trying to hooraw me, Hardin?" he demanded. The other celebrants quickly took cover.

Hardin explained that he had nothing but the highest esteem for Wild Bill, but felt that he had earned the right to return to Abilene as a peaceful citizen. "Well," said Hickok, "why don't you offer me a bottle, then?" And trouble between the two was thus once more averted.



But the next night a six-shooter roared in the corridor outside Hardin's room in the American House, and the young Texan was found with a smoking .44 in his hand, standing over a dead man. According to Hardin's story, the man was a burglar he had caught going through his room.



Suspecting that Wild Bill's patience might be wearing thin, however, Hardin did not stay around to give his story to the Abilene marshal. As Hickok walked into the hotel, Hardin and a cousin leaped from the roof into the open hack in which Wild Bill had arrived, and soon vanished.

Hickok's deputy and two assistants succeeded in picking up Hardin's trail. A few miles outside of town, however, he held them up with a gun borrowed from a cow camp, and sent them back to Abilene disarmed, and clad only in their underwear. It was the last that Abilene or Wild Bill ever saw of Jack Hardin, badman.

This encounter with young Hardin was, of course, hardly more than an incident in the 39-year frontier career of the long-haired, handlebar-mustached marshal of Abilene—the famous Wild Bill Hickok. His reputation was solidly established during the period when he served as sheriff in Hays, Kansas, where he patrolled the streets armed with a bowie knife and a sawed-off shotgun besides his two pistols. There, among others, Hickok killed a desperado named Strawhan. Later he succeeded Tom Smith as Abilene's marshal, where, his name and fame having preceded him, he was generally given a wide berth. Hickok finally met his inevitably violent doom when one Jack McCall shot him in the back while he was playing poker.

How *do you suppose the inhabitants of a frontier town felt when an ex-nautical gentleman swept in from the prairie in his prairie-schooner equipped with sails? The saga of "Wind-wagon" Thomas is a hilarious episode from Stanley Vestal's* The Old Santa Fe Trail, *published in* 1939.

By STANLEY VESTAL

WINDWAGON

THE trail to Santa Fe led from Missouri almost 1000 miles across the Great Plains to the Spanish settlements at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.

Those plains were like the ocean, a region of magnificent distances, of desolate and barren wastes, strange, solitary, unexplored. Sometimes that ocean was a sea of grassy hillocks, sometimes level with the flatness of dead calm, oftener rolling in long swells to the far-off horizon, green, tumultuous, tossing its waves of grass under the driving winds, changing shape and color as swift cloud shadows sped over the uneven surface.

Like the sea, those plains were swept by masses of living things: vast shoals of shaggy bison, antelope, and other game, which appeared and disappeared without warning. Birds, sometimes even gulls, flapped and soared above it. And like the sea, the plains were subject to violent storms, sudden variations of temperature, terrific gales, cruel frosts, tornadoes, and drenching cloudbursts. Here and there that empty sea was broken by buttes like islands, sterile promontories.

The emptiness, the loneliness, the pathetic solemnity of the region oppressed some men, and all women, to the verge of madness. Many, on first emerging from their familiar woodlands, became physically sick. Even Coronado's hard-boiled Spanish troopers were terri-

fied by a country where one could see the sky under a horse's belly.

But for those hardy tempers who could love great spaces, where one spot was no more important than another, experience of the sea of grass was glorifying. On the Great Plains a man of strong identity stood always at the center of his world, a king of infinite space.

Today we think of the Santa Fe Trail in terms of wagons: wagons creaking up long prairie slopes; wagons rolling down hills; wagons grinding through heavy sand, sucking through sticky mud, swishing through tall grass; wagons with locked wheels plunging down steep river-banks; wagons snaked through clinging quicksands, or jiggling over ribbed sandbars rough as cobblestones; wagons hauled yard by painful yard up the forbidding rocks of the Raton Pass, two slow miles a day; wagons corralled against the attacks of treacherous redskins; wagons broken down, abandoned, stranded by the loss of animals stolen by raiding savages; wagons burned in prairie fires; wagons warped and shrunken by the heat and drouth. Wagons crammed with rich furs, Mexican silver, gold bullion.

But in the old days, travelers on those plains spoke habitually of "making port," urged Congress to enact navigation laws for the "prairie ocean." Their covered wagons, appropriately dubbed "prairie schooners," were in fact watertight boats mounted on wheels, rising high at prow and stern. They thought of the plains in terms of seafaring, and felt the glamour of them as a magic of the sea. They named the jumping-off place in Missouri Westport!

In Westport, fittingly enough, a company was actually formed to navigate the uncharted plains in wagons rigged with sails and steering-gear.

One spring day in 1853 the citizens of that frontier town were amazed to see a light vehicle steering down the street, driven by the wind which filled its white sail. Horses reared and ran away, women and children fled into their houses, dogs scuttled for safety, and the men of Westport stood with open mouths, watching that strange craft come sailing in.

Its pilot lowered the sail, locked his brakes, and rolled to a stop before the entrance to the Yoakum Tavern. He disembarked, and the startled citizens gathered to inspect his bark and question him.

They learned that his name was Thomas, that he had come from somewhere east, and that his sole cargo consisted of a compass, a water butt, and a carpetbag. He walked like a seafaring man, and they suspected that he was tattooed under his faded monkey jacket.

Was he a whaler, had he ever struck a fish? They could not tell, for Thomas wasted few words in telling of himself. He announced that he had come as the Navigator of the Prairies, and invited them to join with him and form a company to engage in the Santa Fe trade!

In Yoakum's Tavern leading citizens split a bottle with him, while he diverted them by explaining his plan. He proposed to build —with their backing—a fleet of large prairie clippers to carry cargo to the cussed Spaniards. The advantages of wind-power were numerous, according to the nautical stranger. Speed, economy, freedom from expense of buying and the trouble of feeding draft animals, freedom to leave the Trail along the Arkansas River (since there would be no animals requiring water) and sail on the high prairies by compass. Westport was the outfitting place for all travelers bound west; it would be easy to have the wagons built there. Injuns would be scared of the strange craft. And there would never be any lack of wind to drive them.

But the men of Westport were not to be taken in by any clever Yankee. They dubbed the stranger Windwagon, hooted at his scheme for a "dryland navy," and kept their money in their pockets. And so, when the bottle was empty, Windwagon left the Tavern, not at all cast down by their ridicule. "I'll l'arn ye," he declared. "I'll sail to Council Grove and back. Then maybe you'll listen to reason."

With that, undaunted and imperturbable, he embarked in his wagon, hoisted sail, and left the staring citizens of Westport in his dusty wake. Once beyond the town, he tacked out upon the open prairie, and laid his course to the setting sun. The wiseacres returned to the Tavern, laughing at his folly. It was close upon 150 miles to Council Grove. They thought they had seen the last of Windwagon Thomas.

His coming might have remained a nine days' wonder had he not come sailing into port again before the nine days had elapsed, bringing with him a letter from a well-known man, who managed the blacksmith shop at the Grove. Once more he cast anchor before Yoakum's door, rolled into the Tavern, and proceeded to talk turkey to the men of Westport.

That same day the men who had made fun of him chipped in and financed the building of a super-windwagon. The Overland Navigation Company included among its members and directors Doctor J. W. Parker, a leading physician; Benjamin Newson, the Indian agent; J. J. Mastin, a young lawyer; Henry Sager; Thomas W. Adams,

and the inventor, Windwagon. Under his supervision, the first ship of the plains was built and launched.

The result was a mammoth wagon, constructed after the fashion of a Conestoga prairie schooner. It was fully 25 feet from stem to stern, seven-foot beam, and mounted upon four huge wheels, each 12 feet in diameter, with hubs as big as barrels. The sides of the wagon-box, or cabin, rose to the top of the wheels, and above that was the deck. The craft was rigged like a catboat, with the mast stepped well forward, and carried only a mainsail.

Specifications for the steering-gear are lacking, but it is certain that the craft was intended to move backward; that is, the tail-gate of the wagon was the prow of the ship, and the tongue was brought up and over the stern to serve as tiller. When the craft was completed, the directors gathered in Yoakum's bar and fortified themselves. Then they adjourned to witness the inventor's demonstration.

Two yoke of oxen hauled the huge contrivance out upon the open prairie, and the directors of the Company—with one exception—climbed aboard. Doctor Parker, who knew what broken bones meant, preferred to watch the maiden voyage from the hurricane deck of his saddle mule. Windwagon Thomas, elated by his importance, and perhaps by his potations, took his place on deck, hoisted the mainsail, and grasped the helm.

Slowly the wagon creaked into motion. A strong wind caught the sail, and away it went, rolling high over all obstacles, scooting over hill and dale, tacking and veering over the plain. The passengers were at first amazed, then delighted, and at last alarmed at the speed of their craft. Doctor Parker, who had thoughtfully filled his saddlebags with necessaries for any accidents, whipped his mule into a run, and lumbered after. The windwagon made the wagons drawn by oxen seem like snails.

The directors shut up in the cabin were frightened, unaccustomed as they were to anything faster than a horse and buggy. They dared not abandon ship, and began to call upon the pilot to shorten sail.

But Windwagon Thomas was riding the waves. He paid no heed to their clamor, steering before the gale. Instead of obeying his partners, he began to show his seamanship, and yelled down to his helpless passengers, "Watch me run her against the wind." He put the helm over, and the heavy craft came round grandly.

But then, somehow, something went wrong. The wind caught her, and in spite of all the pilot could

do, the windwagon went into reverse. Doctor Parker and his mule narrowly escaped being run down, and had to turn and fly before the monster. The steering-gear locked, and the craft went sailing round and round in a circle at least a mile wide.

By this time the passengers, thoroughly scared, decided to abandon ship. High as they were above ground, the jump was risky. But they risked it, rather than stay in that crazy ship with its confused hunk of a sea-captain. One by one they dropped to the ground, miraculously unhurt except for a few bruises and considerable fright.

But Windwagon Thomas was made of sterner stuff. He was evidently determined to go down with the ship, colors flying. He remained on deck, clutching the useless helm, until the mammoth wagon jolted him off as it brought up against a stake-and-rider fence on the bank of Turkey Creek.

Nothing Windwagon could say would induce the Company to build the rest of the fleet. The lubbers had no heart for prairie seafaring. They went back to their shops and their offices, put the venture down to profit and loss, and thanked heaven that they were still alive and sound. What else could be expected of men who had halted on the edge of the sea of grass?

But Windwagon remained undaunted. He embarked once more in the small, light craft in which he had come to Westport, made sail, and vanished as swiftly and mysteriously as he had come. History has no more to tell of him.

Maybe he sailed away to shoot buffalo from the afterdeck, or harpoon redskins daring enough to run afoul of him on their cruising ponies. Perhaps he ran hard aground in some deep valley or ravine, where no wind came to fill his sail, and no bull-whacker blundered in to haul him out upon the windy plain. Perhaps the cussed Injuns found him thus becalmed, and hung his hair upon some pony's bridle. There are legends among the Indians of a vehicle seen on the prairie, a wagon that was bigger than any wagon, which moved without horses or oxen to draw it, and carried a white "flag" as tall as a tipi. What became of the Navigator of the Plains will never be known.

But, in two respects, his story is significant, showing us how men of those days thought of the Plains, with all the beauty and mystery of the sea, and also illustrating the dauntless character of the men who crossed them, made them their home.

For the Great Plains of the West were man's country. Women and weaklings shrank from the vastness, the sameness, where there was noth-

ing to give shelter, no bower of trees, no security, no nest. The women either persuaded their men to halt and build at the edge of their familiar woodlands, or scuttled fearfully across the prairies to the snug forests of Oregon, the cozy valleys of California. Even later, when those plains were settled, and lone nesters dotted the grass with sod houses and dugouts, women still hated the lonesome, wind-bitten land. Everything there was different, strange, and frightening. Many and many a settler's wife went crazy on the plains.

But not the men. Not men of the old North European stock, hard-drinking, hard-fighting warriors and wanderers, gamblers and explorers. They loved those plains, delighted in vague, receding horizons, in the loneliness, the sand and the silence, the independence and chancy emergencies of that romantic country. There was Valhalla come to earth, a region where men might do impromptu battle, and ride away to fight again some other day. The moods of the plains were moods of violence, and the men who loved them shared that moodiness. Not since the day of the Vikings had the virile white man found a country so congenial to his heart's desire.

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR HORSES?

How many of the names of different-colored types of horses in the right-hand column can you match correctly with the coat-colors as given in the left-hand column? When you have finished, turn to page 190 for the correct answers. A score of 7 is passing; 8, good; 9, excellent; 10, perfect.

1. Light red —palomino
2. Brown or brownish —blue-roan
3. Mouse-colored —chestnut
4. Cream-colored or golden —buckskin
5. Black and white patches —bay
6. Light yellowish —skewbald
7. Yellowish-brown —grulla
8. Patches of white and another color than black —strawberry-roan
9. Mixture of sorrel and white hairs —sorrel
10. Mixture of mahogany-bay and white hairs —pinto

An "old favorite" cowboy ballad

The Lone Star Trail

I'm a rowdy cowboy just off the stormy plains,
My trade is girdin' saddles an' pullin' bridle reins.
Oh, I can tip the lasso, it is with graceful ease;
I rope a streak of lightnin', an' ride it where I please.
My bosses they all like me, they say I'm hard to beat;
I give 'em the bold stand-off, you bet I've got the cheek.
I always work for wages, my pay I get in gold;
I'm bound to follow the longhorn steer until I am too old.

Ki yi yip-yip-yippy yay.

I'm a Texas cowboy and I do ride the range;
My trade is cinches and saddles and ropes and bridle reins;
With Stetson hat and jinglin' spurs and leather up to the knees,
Gray backs as big as chili beans and fightin' like hell with fleas.
And if I had a little stake, I soon would married be,
But another week and I must go, the boss said so today.
My girl must cheer up courage and choose some other one,
For I'm bound to follow the Lone Star Trail until my race is run.

Ki yi yip-yip-yippy yay.

It almost breaks my heart for to have to go away,
And leave my own little darlin', my sweetheart far away.
But when I'm out on the Lone Star Trail often I'll think of thee,
Of my own dear girl, the darlin' one, the one I'd like to see.
And when I get to a shipping point, I'll go on a little spree
To drive away the sorrow for the girl that once loved me.
And though red licker stirs us up we're bound to have our fun,
And I will follow the Lone Star Trail until my race is run.

Ki yi yip-yip-yippy yay.

I went up the Lone Star Trail in eighteen eighty-three;
I fell in love with a pretty miss and she in love with me.
"When you get to Kansas write and let me know;
And if you get in trouble, your bail I'll come and go."
When I got up in Kansas I had a pleasant dream;
I dreamt I was down on Trinity, down on that pleasant stream;
I dreamt she was right beside me, had come to go my bail;
I woke up broken-hearted with a yearlin' by the tail.

Ki yi yip-yip-yippy yay.

In came my jailer about nine o'clock,
A bunch of keys in his hand, my door to unlock,
Sayin', "Cheer up, my prisoner, I heard some voice say
You're bound to hear your sentence some time today."
In came my mother about ten o'clock,
Sayin', "O my lovin' Johnny, what sentence have you got?"
"The jury found me guilty and the judge a-standin' by
Has sent me down to Huntsville to lock me up and die."

Ki yi yip-yip-yippy yay.

Down come the jailer, just about eleven o'clock,
With a bunch of keys all in his hand the cell doors to unlock,
Sayin', "Cheer up, my prisoner, I heard the jury say
Just ten long years in Huntsville you're bound to go and stay."
Down come my sweetheart, ten dollars in her hand,
Sayin', "Give this to my cowboy, 'tis all that I command;
O give this to my cowboy and think of olden times,
Think of the darlin' that he has left behind."

Ki yi yip-yip-yippy yay.

Answers to "How Well Do You Know Your Horses?"
Quiz on Page 188

1. *Bay.* A bay has a black mane and tail contrasting with its light red coat.
2. *Chestnut.*
3. *Grulla* (pronounced "grool-ya"). A grulla is the result of crossing a chestnut with a bay or a black.
4. *Palomino.* A palomino's mane and tail may be either ivory, silver, or white. A horse with a coat too light a cream to be considered a palomino may be called an "albino"—sometimes a "cremello."
5. *Pinto.* Other names for the pinto are "paint," "piebald," "calico," or "Indian pony."
6. *Buckskin.*
7. *Sorrel.*
8. *Skewbald.*
9. *Strawberry-roan.*
10. *Blue-roan.* Roans may also be "black-roans" (mixture of black and white hairs) or "red-roans" (mixture of bay and white hairs). A red-roan with an all-white belly is called a "sabino."

FREE-FOR-ALL

Welcome, Western story fans! The editors and publishers of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE extend you their greetings, and wish you much reading pleasure. Each issue of ZGWM will be featured by one of the novels of Zane Grey, that old master of Western fiction—printed complete. In addition there will be several short stories and articles, poems or cowboy ballads, and miscellaneous features, all dealing with the great American West.

Some of the stories will be new—others will be old ones which have already proved their merit by delighting readers in days gone by. It is, and will continue to be, the pledge and purpose of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE to bring you the best of Western fact and fiction writing, old and new. The editors and publishers will be satisfied only insofar as the magazine lives up to this pledge.

So, readers, let 'er rip—open up and tell us what you think, of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE. Drop us a line, or lines, whenever you like a story 'specially, or whenever you have a gripe to register about one of them. All letters should be addressed to ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE, Poughkeepsie, New York.

In This Issue:

"Sunset Pass," the Zane Grey novel, has been introduced on page 2, so all there is to say here is that it's one of his best.

"Beginner's Luck" is the first of a series about that close-mouthed young fellow, Ranger Ware, by one of America's finest Western writers, Eugene Cunningham.

"Tennessee's Partner," by Bret Harte, is the initial offering in a projected series of reprints of immortal classics of the West—it's a sentimental

yarn, but a mighty gripping one.

"Windwagon" is an amusing piece about an old-time rangeland visionary from the pen of Stanley Vestal (whose real name is W. S. Campbell). It is a chapter from his book, *The Old Santa Fe Trail.*

"Pasture in the Abandoned Placers," by Raymond S. Spears, is an off-trail yarn which the editors hope will please the readers as much as it did them. Mr. Spears is an author who likes to construct tales with unusual themes, and, subject to reader-opinion, we aim to encourage him.

The picture story, "Wild Bill Hickok and the Texas Badman," is a special feature, the first in a series of similar treatments of famous episodes which live in the traditions of the Old West. They will be, in the main, historical.

In the Next Issue:

"West of the Pecos"—complete novel of old Texas by Zane Grey; packed with action, humor, and color.

"Long-Leaf Lands"—a fast-moving novelette of rivalry and intrigue in the pine forests of East Texas, by J. E. Grinstead.

Short stories: another "Ware's Kid" tale by 'Gene Cunningham; "Cached Legacy," by Frank Richardson Pierce; a Western classic by Mark Twain.

"Crazy As a Sheepherder," by David Lavender—a top-notch article.

And a number of other interesting features.

Watch for the January-February number—on sale December 6.

DON'T MISS THE NEXT SIX ISSUES! SUBSCRIBE NOW!

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE
Poughkeepsie, New York.

Gentlemen:

Please send me the next six issues of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE. I enclose $1.50 (Canada, $1.75; foreign, $2.00).

Name: .....

Address: .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

GIT ALONG, LITTLE DOGIES

AS I walked out one morning for pleasure,
I spied a cowpuncher all riding alone;
His hat was throwed back and his spurs was a jinglin'
As he approached me a-singin' this song:

Whoopee ti yi yo, git along, little dogies,
It's your misfortune and none of my own.
Whoopee, ti yi yo, git along, little dogies,
For you know Wyoming will be your new home.

Early in the spring we round up the dogies,
Mark and brand and bob off their tails;
Round up our horses, load up the chuck-wagon,
Then throw the dogies upon the North trail.

It's whoopin' and yellin' and drivin' the dogies;
Oh, how I wish you would go on;
It's whoopin' and punchin', go on, little dogies,
For you know Wyoming will be your new home.

Some boys go up the trail for pleasure,
But that's where you get it most awfully wrong;
For you have no idea the trouble they give us
While we go drivin' them all along.

Your mother she was raised 'way down in Texas,
Where the jimson-weed and the sand-burrs grow;
Now we'll fill you up on prickly pear and cholla,
Till you are ready for the trail to Idaho.

Oh, you'll be soup for Uncle Sam's Injuns;
"It's beef, heap beef," I hear them cry.
Git along, git along, git along, little dogies,
You're goin' to be beef-steers by and by.

NIGHT GUARD Painted by Dan Muller